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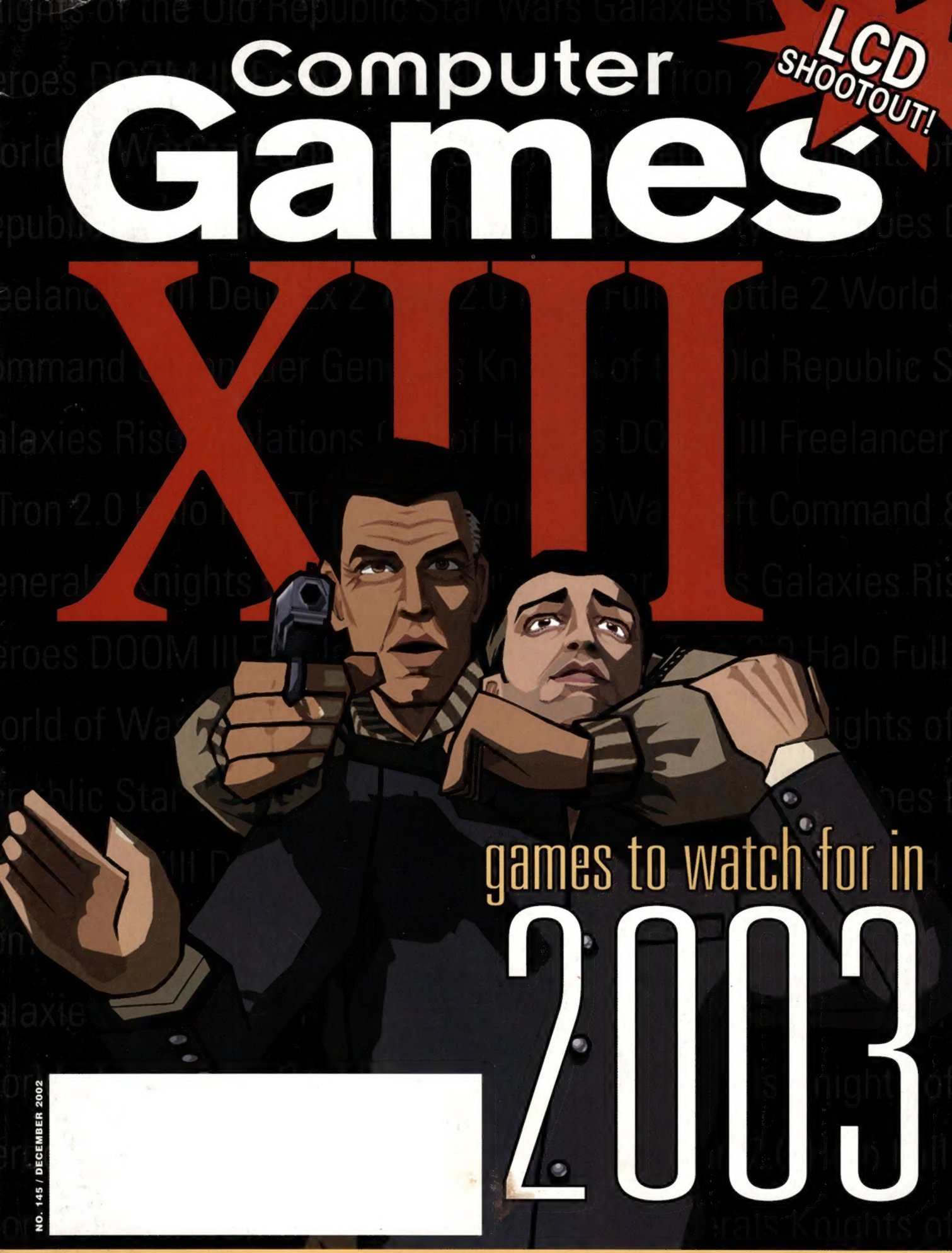

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NO. 145 / DECEMBER 2002

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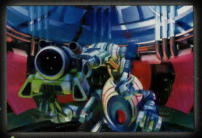

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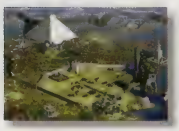

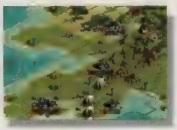

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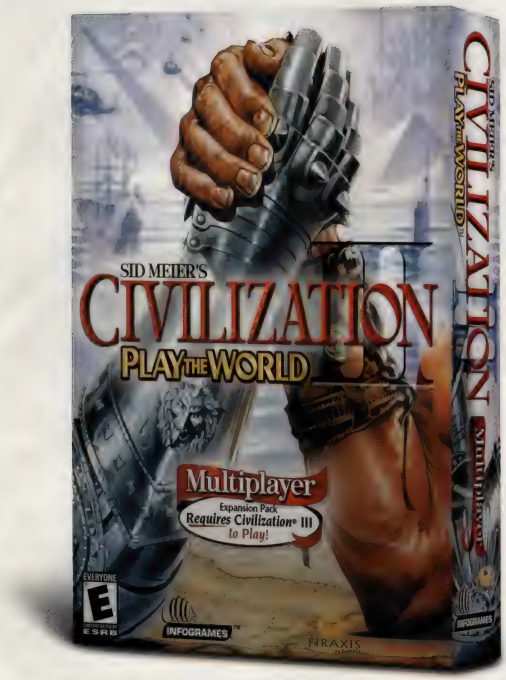

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STEVE BAUMAN

upfront

adults only

Gaming on the road to immaturity

Does your idea of a "mature" game include dogs having sex and/or public urination? It does if you're Acclaim, whose *BMX XXX* is the self-appointed poster boy for the "maturation of the game industry," to use the words of its spokesperson in an article on CNN.com. Of course it's hard not to wonder if this is a marketing stunt or some kind of desperate cry for attention since we're talking about a company that managed to get someone to name their newborn child "Turok" for a year and advertised *Shadow Man 2* on tombstones.

What makes *BMX XXX* "mature" are the following features, taken from its website: "Live strippers, pimps, ho's, and enough dog doo to make you piss your pants." IGN.com perhaps best sums up the game, and their editorial style, saying, "You will see boobies."

All of you out there that have never seen "boobies" before, raise your hand, or some other representative part of your anatomy! Since it's fair to say a large majority of readers—and at least 99.9% of our woman readers—can answer yes to the above question, how does this represent the "maturation of the industry?" That's like saying *American Pie* is more "mature" than *Signs* because, you know, a chick gets naked in it, and there's a sex scene with pastry.

Yet *BMX XXX* gets publicity, alongside games like the T&A fest *Dead or Alive Xtreme Beach Volleyball*, as an example of how games are growing up. C'mon, people can do better than this. These are adolescent, "Wouldn't it be cool if..." designs, and they're probably considerably cooler if you hadn't seen actual boobies yet.

Making these claims even more dubious is realizing that the themes covered in your average *Final Fantasy* game are considerably more "mature" than polygonal T&A. And that doesn't even take into account games like *Planescape Torment*, *Deus Ex*, or any *Ultima* game. What about the sharp and sophisticated humor in *No One Lives Forever 2* [see page 78]? Even *Max Payne* tried to give some deeper meaning and resonance to its semi-random acts of wanton violence.

But we're talking about sex here, and as everyone's always quick to say, "Sex sells." That's not entirely true; it draws attention, but that sort of notoriety doesn't necessarily lead to sales. $50 games aren't impulse purchases like the latest edition of *Maxim*, and due to the repetitive nature of videogames, sex appeal alone isn't enough to sustain a game. Gameplay, again, wins out.

Sex will always find its way into games, just as it did back when Sierra's *Leisure Suit Larry* was called *Softporn Adventure*, and *Cobra Mission* emerged from the land of the rising nipple in the early '90s. And there's nothing wrong with this. In fact, the spokesperson for Acclaim is correct, its existence and acceptance in games is a sign of maturation. The appearance of more adult themes in games is inevitable, but the baby steps will, as always, be slightly less than subtle.

There's room for everything in gaming, including something like *BMX XXX*. To say otherwise is to ignore the existence of, say, Tom Green. Hollywood understands this. Some people only watch movies like *Requiem for a Dream*, while others only watch *There's Something About Mary*. There's nothing wrong those looking for "serious" entertainment or "non-serious" entertainment. Both may be "serious" about their interests. As with most filmgoers, I bounce back and forth between extremes, though I know I'd rather watch someone have sex with a pastry in *American Pie* a thousand times than be forced to suffer through more of Tom Cruise acting tormented in *Eyes Wide Shut*.

The difference between Hollywood and gaming, at least at this stage, is you can enjoy many films on multiple levels. Most games are only enjoyable on a purely visceral level. Few raise issues beyond, "The evil guy is doing something really bad. He's irredeemably evil, and you must kill him and thousands of other irredeemably evil people." In adding more adult themes, whether they're sexual or not, it's time for some games to add more shades of gray, to at least try to show some consequence for your actions, some subtext, or some additional meaning. Moreover, as long as you're not dogmatic, none of this negatively affects the player interested only in "entertainment." •

> "In adding more adult themes, whether they're sexual or not, it's time for some games to add more shades of gray, to at least try to show some consequence for your actions, some subtext, or some additional meaning."

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Sid Meier's LEGACY

The question isn't so much whether the legendary designer will revisit some of the games of his past. It's merely which ones will they be.

by Andrew S. Bub

Sid Meier's Sid Meier!

Sid Meier is easily one of the most respected game designers in the business. To many, his name is synonymous with quality gaming, and few designers have covered more genres for as many years. He was a founding member of MicroProse and left to form Firaxis shortly before that company was tossed around between Hasbro and Infogrames. Meier and company partnered with the latter to bring *Sid Meier's Civilization III* to store shelves, bringing Meier and his original creation full circle.

While this was an interesting turn of events, it was made even more interesting after Meier teased an audience at Gen Con 2002 in Milwaukee, saying, "Since *Civilization III* was such a success, we've given a lot of thought to remaking some of my other games." He then asked the crowd what games it would like to see.

Many told him they want a remake of Meier's legendary action/role-playing/strategy hybrid *Pirates*, but Meier only nodded and allowed that the game would look good with today's technology. He mentioned *Colonization* as a possibility, as well as his offbeat spy game *Covert Action*, but the crowd showed little interest in those titles. "How about *Gettysburg*!" shouted some wargame fan. Sid smiled and admitted, "I'd love to revisit *Gettysburg*, but those are Firaxis games, we already have the rights to it and *Alpha Centauri*." Then Meier tantalizingly remarked "Our deal with Infogrames gives us access to the entire MicroProse catalog, so we have a lot of choices," then mentioned *Master of Magic* and *X-COM*. The crowd began peppering him with questions and other suggestions.

For fans of any of those games, it's hard not to be interested in a modern day remake, or any of Meier's various tank, flight, or submarine games. What would a designer like Meier bring to games like *X-COM* or *Master of Magic*? Both games are seen as classics that easily rival the best of his own oeuvre.

So what will the legacy game be? Meier said he's very interested in *Master of Magic* and *X-COM*. "We get a lot of requests for *Pirates*," he said with a smile, and when asked about the submarine sim *Silent Service* he said, "That and *Red Storm Rising* would be interesting to remake." When asked about *Railroad Tycoon*, he mentioned only that he liked PopTop's sequel and felt no need to revisit that license.

After the event, Firaxis backtracked somewhat, saying the company hasn't actually secured any rights to old MicroProse games from Infogrames. "Sid Meier was probably being optimistic when he mentioned that," explained Firaxis' PR Director Kathy Gilmore, saying the

company is negotiating for licenses but there was nothing she could specifically reveal. "I've been told we're negotiating for Sid's legacy titles," she said, but not the games Meier didn't design (like *X-COM* and *Master of Magic*). She could not deny, however, that other "non-Sid" titles might be included given what Meier said at Gen Con. She also said that the licenses were being negotiated one at a time and not in a lump settlement, adding that she was very optimistic about how the negotiations were proceeding. She confirmed that Firaxis plans to announce the next Sid Meier game soon after *Civilization III: Play the World* is released in late October, but couldn't guarantee that the announcement would have anything to do with MicroProse legacy titles.

Interestingly, Firaxis recently licensed the NetImmerse game engine, a 3D engine used to power games as diverse as *Star Trek Bridge Commander* and *Freedom Force*. Of course, the new engine could be for some new non-MicroProse related title. Meier only admitted that 3D has come a long way. "Games like *Warcraft III* and *Age of Mythology* prove you can use the technology without sacrificing detail," he said.

Meier is notorious for extensive research, but when asked what he's been reading lately, he only smiled and declined to comment, avoiding the bait. Then his family arrived and escorted him onto the show floor leaving us all to wonder about the next Sid Meier game, and what Firaxis has planned for MicroProse's legacy.

Special thanks to www.mobygames.com for the use of its scans of the old MicroProse games. ●

You take on the role of Nova, a lethal Ghost operative... or at least you will on your console.

"Ghosts" of Blizzard

Blizzard announces a new StarCraft ... for consoles only

by Steve Bauman

On September 20th at the Tokyo Gameshow, Blizzard announced its next game, *StarCraft: Ghost*. Unfortunately, PC gamers interested in a 3D, third-person, *Metal Gear Solid*-styled romp through a familiar gaming universe will need a console to play it; it's for multiple "next-generation" platforms only. Co-developed by Blizzard and Nihilistic Software (*Vampire: The Masquerade*), it's scheduled for release in late 2003.

"We're very excited about returning to the *StarCraft* series," said Mike Morhaime, Blizzard Entertainment president and co-founder in the press release, pointing out that the company's roots are in console, not PC gaming (the developer's first games included *Rock N' Roll Racing* and *The Lost Vikings* for the SNES).

In other Blizzard console news, the company announced they would bring *The Lost Vikings* to the GameBoy Advance. ●

Separated at Birth?

If you thought Hamid Karzai looked familiar, you were right. Behold the disturbing similarity between the Afghani President and Bruno Lawrie from *No One Lives Forever*. (With thanks to Jason McCullough)

WHAT ARE YOU PLAYING?

Brenda Braithwaite

Lead Designer, MicroProse

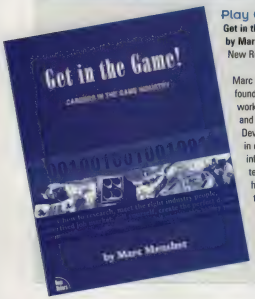
"*Dungeons & Dragons Heroes*. I'm either working on it or playing it. It's really coming together now, and it's a blast to play with four players. As if I don't get enough at work, I play traditional D&D once a month, too, with some people from Infogrames Hunt Valley (formerly MicroProse) and a programmer from Firaxis. I have *Neverwinter Nights*, but I have to wait until we hit alpha before I open it otherwise, I'll get no sleep at all. My favorite game, of course, which I play night and day is SimDiaper and RealMom with my 19-month old daughter, Maezza."

Jason Hall

C.E.O., Monolith Productions

"Aside from *No One Lives Forever 2*, I have been playing and quite thoroughly enjoying *WarCraft III* on Battle.net. I have set up a special 'strategy practice' account and have been using it to try almost every single fundamental strategy that I can think of. By 'fundamental,' I mean a generalized theme that I can successfully use consistently throughout the game."

SPOTLIGHT



Play Games for a Living

Get in the Game! Careers in the Game Industry
by Marc Mencher
New Riders (www.newriders.com), $29.95

Marc Mencher wants to tell you how to get a job. Before founding a game recruiting firm (Game Recruiter), he worked for Spectrum Holobyte, MicroProse, and 3DO, and later as a board member of the International Game Developers Network. He created his book to assist you in obtaining a job in the game industry. It includes information from over a dozen folks in the industry telling you how to meet people and dupe them into hiring you, or alternately how to acquire the skills that properly "sell" yourself based on your merits and background. It covers creating demos, handling interviews, negotiating salaries and Mountain Dew allowances, while discussing specific careers in game design, programming, art, and production.

TOP SELLERS

1	WARCRAFT III: REIGN OF CHAOS Blizzard Entertainment Rating ★★★★
2	THE SIMS: VACATION Electronic Arts Rating ★★★½
3	THE SIMS Electronic Arts Rating ★★★★½
4	MADDEN NFL 2003 EA Sports Rating ★★★★½
5	NEVERWINTER NIGHTS Infogrames Rating ★★★★★
6	BACKYARD BASEBALL 2003 Infogrames Not Rated
7	MEDAL OF HONOR: ALLIED ASSAULT Electronic Arts Rating ★★★★½
8	THE SIMS: HOT DATE Electronic Arts Rating ★★★½
9	GRAND THEFT AUTO III Rockstar Rating ★★★★½
10	MEDIEVAL: TOTAL WAR Activision Rating ★★★★

11. Zoo Tycoon; 12. The Sims Livin' Large; 13. RollerCoaster Tycoon; 14. RollerCoaster Tycoon Gold; 15. Diablo II Expansion Set: Lord of Destruction; 16. The Sims House Party; 17. StarCraft: Battle Chest; 18. Age of Empires II: Age of Kings; 19. Harry Potter & The Sorcerer's Stone; 20. Icewind Dale II

Source: NPD INTELLECT® Market Tracking. The December list is based on units sold by forty-two retail chains, representing more than 80% of the U.S. market.

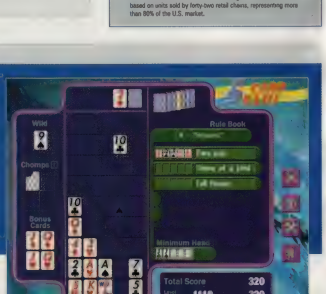
OFFBEAT

Poker goes Tetri

5 Card Dash $19.99

Any fan of *Tetris*-style gameplay will want to take a look at this game from CogniToy, creators of the intricate strategy game, *Mind Rover*. This exceptionally addicting product challenges you to create poker hands from randomly falling tiles, as you fight for high score. There is a mind-boggling race against the clock, an un-timed puzzle mode, and a freelance practice mode.

While it might seem straightforward, bonus cards, special action cards, wild cards, and cards that "eat" the currently falling card (Chomp cards) all bring a much more strategic element to the game. Gameplay is level-based, each level requiring you to complete certain combinations of hands, and beware, you may find yourself falling victim to the lil tile voice that urges "just one more hand..." The game is shareware, and you can download a demo at www.cognitoy.com.



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Introducing history's first multiplayer city sim, complete with a serious mean streak. Join forces with neighbors to erect authentic Chinese monuments and structures, or annihilate on fine rivals with ruthless military tactics and underhanded diplomacy. All in the most civilized manner, of course.

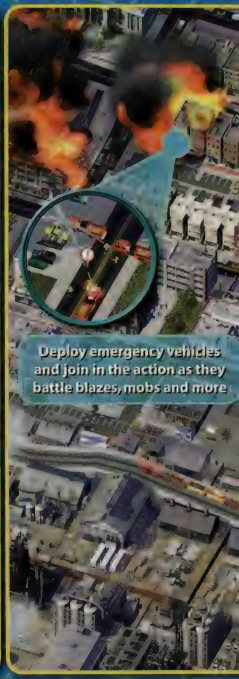
Emperor
Rise of the Middle Kingdom

Download the demo at
emperor.sierra.com

God's Hand

May

Sculpt mountains, gouge valleys, seed forests, and bring forth animals to create a world all your own
Summon volcanoes, release tornados, and call down meteors and lightning



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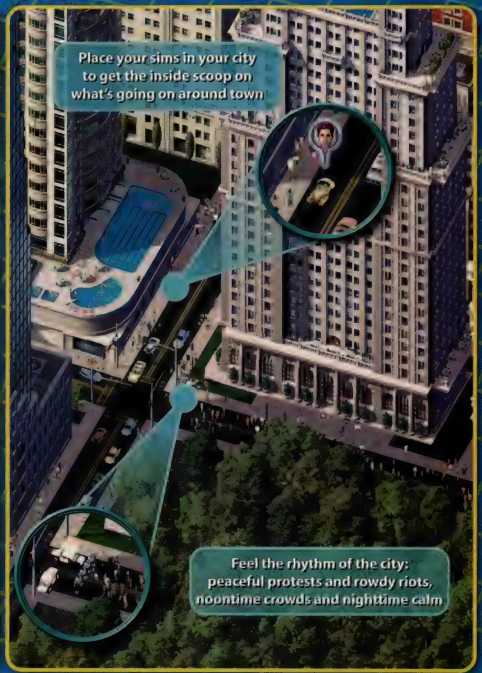
or's Limo

Your Sims


Place your sims in your city to get the inside scoop on what's going on around town
Feel the rhythm of the city: peaceful protests and rowdy riots, noontime crowds and nighttime calm

ity of your dreams.

Immerse yourself in the lives of your Sims.

SIMCITY 4

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EA GAMES

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"...the game looks amazing – the explosions, detonations, and other effects are spectacular."
–Computer Games–
Disney's
Treasure Planet
Battle at Procyon
Disney Interactive
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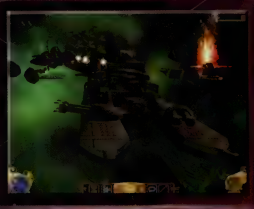
E
Violence



Ships and weapons like you've never seen

"...it's a swashbuckling good time."
–Computer Gaming World–

Fierce combat with powerful adversaries

"...the six full servings of multiplayer should more than accommodate even the most gluttonous of gamers."
–IGN–

Strategic online multi-player combat

"Treasure Planet is Disney's surprise gem for the holidays."
–Computer Games–

A universe unlike any other

Of Human Bond-age

007: NightFire pays homage to 40 years of shaken, but not stirred, action

by Suzanne Ashe

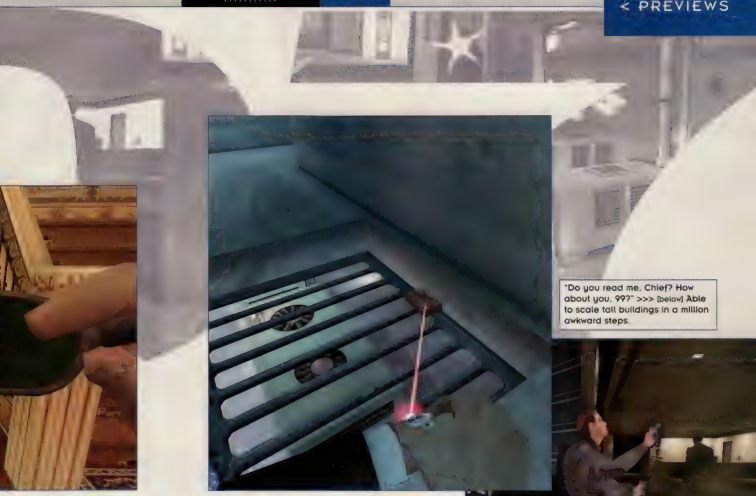
(above) Storm troopers below! >>> That batch of cleavage does warrant sunglasses removal.

After a number of demonstrations of *James Bond 007: NightFire* where Electronic Arts didn't allow anyone to actually play the game, it's hard not to get antsy while the game's producer, Michael Condrey, runs through three levels before turning over the controls. You control Bond as he starts off high in the Austrian Alps where he needs to penetrate a castle and collect data about a Nuke Lord named Drake. After you jump from a bomber and land near the target, you need to stowaway on a transport to get behind the stone walls—don't fret, however, there are other ways in, including a shooting out some searchlights and picking a lock. Although ammo is plentiful, it's never a problem to pluck more from an enemy's corpse. There are a few goodies, though, which are in short supply and warrant some careful handling, one of which is a mini turret gun in a briefcase. Toss this baby into the fray to lay down some ground cover while Bond scurries away.

After gathering pertinent intel, Bond makes his way to Tokyo where he sneaks past several civilian guards and gains access to more sensitive material. No use going in all Chow Yun Fat (the powers that be nicked the double-fisted pistol action that the developers threw in as added firepower). Here, a lighter touch is required. Dialing up the menu of gadgets he has at his disposal—a key chain/stunner, a cigarette lighter/camera, and a fountain pen/dart gun, and a PDA/decoder—Bond can effectively disarm the guards, disable the alarm system and take over the control room in about the time it takes the average bartender to shake a chilled cocktail.

"These guards are sneaky," says Condrey. "They'll hide behind one-way mirrors, duck behind objects, kick back grenades, and do just about anything to take Bond out." He suggests that setting up hot keys before hand will aid in accessing each device.

After disabling key areas of the techno terrorists regime, you jet off to the South Pacific where you dive headfirst into more trouble. At Drake's offshore lair of evil you are able to crack a code and plan the next move. After swimming through the treacherous South Pacific Sea, you next blast off to an orbiting Space Station where you go toe to toe with villains in space suits and jet packs. Other levels include infiltrating Fort Knox and schmoozing in a high rolling casino. Enemies and allies are plentiful on each level, as are weapons. Some guns are even stashed in secret areas. One such cache of goods can be found behind a bookcase Harry Potter-style. You can get to them by



"Do you read me, Chief? How about you, 99?" >>> (below) Able to scale tall buildings in a million awkward steps.

pushing the right tomes, until the bookcase rolls back revealing the vault behind.

You can easily shift the camera angle around to take advantage of the massive levels and intricate architecture. The view can even track Bond from a distance, as in the case of the character inching across a high wire. From this view players get a clear, yet somewhat unsettling, shot of actor Pierce Brosnan's face. Indoors and at night players can pullout the infrared goggles, to peer behind a rice paper wall, or perhaps just to scan a potential date with the aid of x-ray lenses. And no secret agent's life would be complete without the crack support team of the perpetually irritated Q, M, and Miss Moneypenny.

Although the game has all the flavor a Bond feature film, including the Aston Martin, there is no way to drive the car—it's all done in cut scenes (the console version of the game, developed by Eurocom, offers seamless driving play). Instead, the PC game offers online multiplayer levels. Here players can take on the persona of number of Bond allies or enemies in "capture the flag," or "Good" vs. "Evil." Players can assume the identities of Zoe (from Agent Under Fire), or anyone from Odd Job to Pussy Galore.

All in all, it appears there is plenty of action to accompany this interactive tribute to the Bond films, which celebrate their 40th anniversary this year. *NightFire* will debut this winter during the same timeframe as the motion picture release of *Die Another Day*. And if Electronic Arts and developer Gearbox Software have anything to say about it, *NightFire* will intrigue you enough to Play Another Night. ●

Bond takes on three laser-equipped gunmen with his t'il old pistol.

EverQuest

Planes of Power

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VIOLENCE
SUGGESTIVE THEMES

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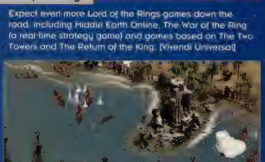
Kill Bill

There will be a game based on Quentin Tarantino's upcoming Kill Bill. The movie stars Uma Thurman as an assassin who swears revenge on her former master and his squad of international assassins. [Black Label Games]

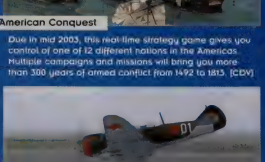
Lord of the Rings

Expect even more Lord of the Rings games down the road, including Middle Earth Online, The War of the Ring (a real-time strategy game) and games based on The Two Towers and The Return of the King. [Vivendi Universal]



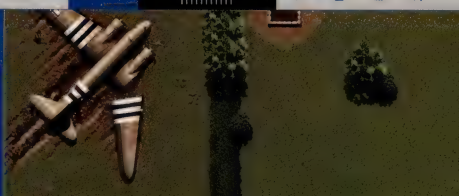
American Conquest

Due in mid 2003, this real-time strategy game gives you control of one of 12 different nations in the Americas. Multiple campaigns and missions will bring you more than 300 years of armed conflict from 1492 to 1813. [CDV]



IL-2 Sturmovik: Forgotten Battles

This expansion for the superb flight simulator adds 30 new missions, 27 new flyable aircraft, and a dynamic campaign. [UbiSoft]



Invasion from the Skies

All American: The 82nd Airborne in Normandy promises up close and personal wargaming

by Jeff Lackey

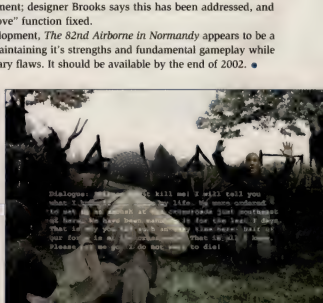
All American: *The 82nd Airborne in Normandy* hopes to build on the venerable tradition of turn based, squad level, tactical PC games (think *X-COM* and *Jagged Alliance 2*) with its realistic depiction of small unit actions in WWII's Normandy invasion. Its predecessor, *101: The Airborne Invasion of Normandy*, was praised for its depth and authenticity. Designer Tim Brooks' goal is to retain all of the features that players enjoyed in that game and improve on the few areas that gave cause for complaint.

Like its predecessor, it presents you with a large roster of individual soldiers of varying ranks, personalities, and skills from which you must assemble and equip a squad. Reaching the battlefield will be half the battle: as is historically accurate, the transport plane may be hit by flak, paratroopers may be wounded, separated from their squadron, or fail to survive the jump. Thus the first task will be to reassemble the squad and then attempt to ascertain, from the game maps, where the team has been dropped relative to the mission objectives. The game then simulates the encounters and battles a WWII small unit might face as it strives to accomplish the missions. The plan is for the missions to present enough variability to allow the campaigns to be replayed without becoming predictable.

As with many wargames, it's attempting to appeal to grognards and casual gamers alike, allowing the hardcore to control minute details such as weapons selection while permitting novices to automate these choices. Improvements include new art, more varied missions (including street fighting,) improved AI behavior, and more weapons effects. One common complaint about *101* was the slow soldier movement; designer Brooks says this has been addressed, and the crippled "group move" function fixed.

At this point of development, *The 82nd Airborne in Normandy* appears to be a nice upgrade to *101*, maintaining it's strengths and fundamental gameplay while improving on the primary flaws. It should be available by the end of 2002. ●

(above) As in the real event, the odds of your paradrop going as planned is quite low. >>> (left) All American will introduce the option of allowing enemy soldiers to surrender (and perhaps providing vital information).



In the modern world,

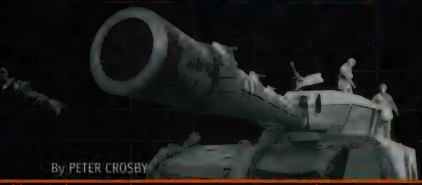
GREAT LEADERS RESOLVE CONFLICT

WITH WORDS

THE UNITED NATIONS OFFICE AT GENEVA (UNOG)

Established in Geneva (1946), the center for diplomacy and the peaceful settlement of international disputes has had a spotty record. In times of global crisis, the United Nation does their best to prevent armed conflict. All too often, however, it is not enough.

WORDS LIKE:
"CARPET BOMBING," "SCUD LAUNCHERS"



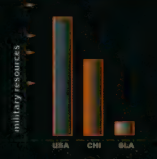
By PETER CROSBY

Recent military aggressions around the globe have many nation's worried. Between the United States, China and the Global Liberation Army, tensions run high. Their leaders profess no interest in escalating the situation, but words ring hollow when satellite photos tell a different story. The issue is no longer "Will there be military conflict?" but instead, "Who will prevail?"

CHINA:

JANUARY 22ND, 2020

ON THE BRINK OF ARMAGEDDON:



THE WILD CARD:

Despite their inferior military resources, the GLA still poses a real threat to worldwide security.

GLOBAL LIBERATION ARMY:

AND "TOMAHAWK MISSILES"

AND "STEALTH FIGHTERS," "NUKES,"

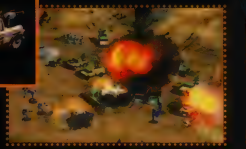
TO GO OR NOT?

5% International support for military action is minimal at best.

15% Aggression by either China or the US will be unanimously and publicly derided by the global community.

80% Not surprisingly, most countries still contend that non-violent embargos, boycotts and international pressure are more effective than violence.

CASE CARBON



RATING PENDING
RP
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PC CD ROM

JANUARY 22ND, 2020

TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANTAGE?

Despite the difference in resources, all three forces achieve an eerie kind of parity. The GLA's low-tech approach is no less effective than either China's superior forces or America's advanced technologies.

AND "PATRIOT MISSILE SYSTEMS"

COMMAND & CONQUER GENERALS

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EA GAMES

Challenge Everything

lucky

Triskaidekaphobia. Now there's a word you don't hear every day. Strictly, the word refers to the unreasonable fear of the number 13—a prime number, a Fibonacci number—it doesn't get scarier than that. Unless you count Wes Craven's masked mass-murderer; or Kevin Bacon, who died in the first *Friday the 13th* film, and has been dying in films ever since. The word comes from the Greek, from *tris*, meaning "three", *kai*, meaning "and", *deka*, meaning "ten" (mathematicians may confirm that "three" and "ten" make thirteen), and *phobia*, meaning "fear" or "flight".

In the 1980s, writer Jean Van Hamme and illustrator William Vance collaborated on the Belgian comic book ***XIII***. UbiSoft jumped on the franchise, so you can now expect a sweet-edged shooter that takes the triskai-Greek, adds Belgian, a touch of French-Canadian, and American, and serves it up warm. Okay, it's hardly Craven-esque, but you can still expect an adventuresome and gripping story with a few holes, most created by your arsenal. Here is a peek at its innards, and just for the triskaidekaphobic amongst you, here's twelve of its buddies that serve as some of the more anticipated games of 2003.

13

The stunning-looking XIII, plus twelve others to watch for in 2003

by Jason Cross, Chris Hudak, Kevin Rice, and Cindy Yans

All niche comics make great games because potential best-sellers. Isn't that a given? Of course not. Publishers with "best-seller" dollar signs in their eyes generally want to make games for Everyman. Why, then, did Ubi Soft opt to make a shooter adaptation of Jean Van Hamme's tiny Belgian comic series, *XIII*?

Because tiny is relative. Found only in French speaking nations from Seychelles to Burkina Faso—well, maybe not *all* French speaking nations—the *XIII* comics have sold millions of copies. That's not so "tiny" after all. The game is unique in its look and tone, and it will be focused slightly differently for each of its release platforms, with the PC weighing in the heaviest because of its strength as a multiplayer machine.

So why did they make it? Because they thought that it would be, in a word, "cool."

The character you play is *XIII*. You are washed up on a beach with the Roman numerals tattooed on your clavicle, but with little else tattooed in your brain. Amnesia—a plot device found in works from *Planescape Torment* to Robert Ludlum's *The Bourne Identity* (and speaking of Bourne, let's see… a man dragged from the Mediterranean, his appearance altered, amnesia…certainly many have likened *XIII* to the Ludlum *Bourne* books. But Van Hamme has disagreed, indicating that his alcoholic doctor character is the only element similarly contained in the Ludlum work, and that the rest of his ideas differ radically from those in the book.

Your mission is to find out who you really are and why all these people are trying to kill you. "You don't know who you are when you start, but then you discover who you *think* you are, but then, it turns out you're not that person, you're somebody else pretending to be that person for a reason," explains brand manager John Coghlan. In fact, you are a secret government agent who is part of an organization that is linked to a presidential assassination. So you think you are XIII, but actually you are that government agent pretending to be XIII. The super duper FBI doesn't know this, however, and is pursuing you for your role in the assassination. The other Roman numeral people (and there are nineteen more of them, from I to XX) also still think you are XIII, but now they have their own vendetta against you. Have no fear, as a General and an undercover super duper government group that know who you actually are, and they are there to help you.

"Like any character of the game, the AI will go through some routines and evaluation to dynamically adapt itself to the player's decisions and movements."

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EVERYONE

E

CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

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PC CD ROM

jaleco

Major Jones, an Air Force officer who can pilot various military aircraft, is part of this correctly informed group. She tries to help you discover the truth about your identity and about the assassination. "To describe her role we can say that she's a kind of 'guardian angel' for XIII," executive producer Julian Bares says. "For instance, she will help you to escape from certain places where you are outnumbered by enemies, or from bases where you're jailed…Other times, she will give you concrete instructions on the objectives of your missions—go destroy this, steal these documents, etc."

Your amnesia abates slowly throughout the game, and your moments of recall are illustrated in flashback sequences. Unlike cutscene flashbacks, these sequences will allow you to move around and interact within them. You can disregard their complexity and return to the shooter at hand, or you can linger a bit and get a clearer picture of the backstory. And they're all stylized with a kind of glow around the characters that differentiates these moments from "real" time.

If you ask around about this game, probably the first thing people acknowledge in recognition is, "Oh, yeah. That's that French thing with the cel shaded graphics." Cel shading is the art of rendering objects to give them a "cartoon-y" effect. In a nutshell, it is a way of lighting 3D models. The models are rendered just the way they would normally be, but the artists use only one or two colors on the surface, so instead of all of the nuances of realism, you get solid colors and an object that looks hand drawn, like the "cels" of old cartoons.

Cel Shading has not been as popular on the PC as it has in many console games, and while *Jet Grind Radio*, *Sly Cooper*, and *Auto Modellista* have wholly embraced it, *XIII* is the first PC shooter to use this technique. What is interesting is that, in this case, UbiSoft has moved away from the trend we have seen ever since 3D became *de rigeur* for shooters, namely that designers strived harder and harder to make them more photorealistic. Although a departure, this style is extremely compelling in a first person shooter, from its visual comic book appeal to its onomatopoeia. Bam! Zowie! Boom! and many other interjections pepper the combat scenes and a persistent audiovisual "Tap tap tap" effect indicates that something sinister is likely going on around that corner or behind that door.

Although *XIII* is not innovative in its inclusion of somewhat more "refined" gameplay than the *DOOM*-like *Quake*dom preferred by some (it's more about stealth and the mastery of a few weapons than about dragging out the Big Guns), it still rounds out the experience with a few tricks. There is cooperative gameplay in which scripted missions involve working with the NPCs to your advantage. "The dynamic AI gives NPCs the capacity to evaluate if he needs to help, to run, or to cover XIII," explains Bares. "For example, in one level,

players will cover the NPC, Major Jones, as she runs across a roof littered with gangsters. When you successfully get her across, she will in turn cover you. Like any character of the game, the AI will go through some routines and evaluation to dynamically adapt itself to the player's decisions and movements."

As with *Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell*, you'll be able to drag your enemies in front of you and use them as human shields. To do so, you need to sneak up behind one and grab him by the neck. And after he has served his purpose, or if he has begun to hum Country-Western music, you'll be able to dispose of him by handily breaking his neck and dropping him on the ground.

You're not Bond, and you're not McGuyver. Instead, mastering things like knives and crossbows becomes important, as does finding weapons in the environment. If you don't have a gun, or if it would be too noisy to use one, you can pick up everyday objects to wield instead. Ashtrays, chairs, bottles, rubber chickens with a pulley in the middle, fire extinguishers...even pieces of broken glass can serve as throwing weapons. And yes, there will be guns for those who must have them, from pistols to machine guns and sniper rifles.

Unlike the version on somewhat more "simplistic" platforms, the PC incarnation of the game will be able to host up to 32-player online matches and will also include a map editor. Since so many stoic level builders have had hands-on experience with many of the other *Unreal*-based editors, making

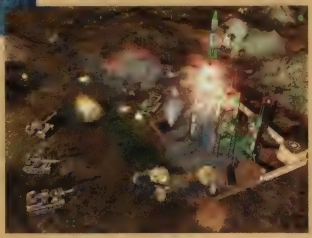
command & conquer generals

Command & Conquer is one of the games that introduced the world to real-time strategy and garnered even more clones than, say, *Myst*. In its latest iteration, *Generals*, the Chinese are protecting their border zones from Global Liberation Army (GLA) terrorists, and this time, there is no full-motion video at their disposal (hip hip hooray!). Instead, the story will unfold during in-game cutscenes interspersed among three eight-mission campaigns, as you choose one of three factions upon which to impose your will and attempt to control the GLA situation. Instead of the normal difficulty progression from campaign to campaign, you'll see that this time Westwood has balanced the difficulty levels as equally as possible among them so that you can play them in any order. The game also introduces a new line of leaders, including the U.S. Commando-like unit, the GLA sniper, the Chinese hacker, and more. So just when you thought you couldn't absorb another *Command & Conquer* game, along comes *Generals*, which should be at least a "departure" by this point. Well it is, and it isn't.

"The franchise has always explored modern warfare with a particular style and pacing of gameplay,"

"We're creating a "Hollywood-action-war movie" type of experience that people can identify with..."

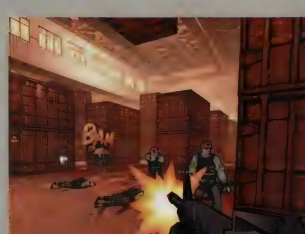
says Mark Skaggs, general manager of EA Pacific and executive in charge of production for *Command & Conquer: Generals*. "Since it's inception, we've visited the high-tech, sci-fi oriented world of *Tiberian Sun* and the over-the-top alternative history of *Red Alert*. *Generals* continues this trend by exploring the chaos and intensity of the modern war you're seeing today on CNN." But since Westwood knows that it cannot continue to shine as brightly unless its games stand out from the rest, it has taken pains to help this happen. "What sets *Generals* apart is it's unique and exciting approach to the real-time strategy category. We're creating a "Hollywood-action-war movie" type of experience that people can identify with more than they do with orcs and gods," explains Skaggs. "Beyond that and our outstanding graphics, we're working hard to evolve and perfect gameplay with features like enhanced veterancy, building and unit upgrade, and a new approach to online rankings and ladders systems."



All right, then, it sounds a whole lot like...a *Command &Conquer* world. But you'll take it. Right?

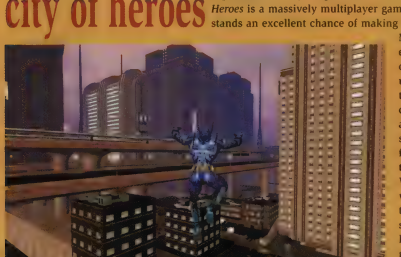
maps for this game should be a smooth transition.

So the *XIII* comic adventure of the 1980s steps into this decade, boldly and confidently, with a retro-trendy twist. Sometime next year we'll see if it cuts the mustard. If it does, that might prove that publishers don't necessarily need to target Everyman. And that would be, in two words, very cool.



city of heroes

If premise has anything to do with it, *City of Heroes* is a massively multiplayer game that stands an excellent chance of making its mark in MMG society. Not only is it unlike anything else out there, it also grabs superhero fans where they live. Who doesn't want to battle demented super villains for the good of all? Instead of the medieval fairy setting that graces most of its competitors, this game sports Paragon City, a full 36 square mile stretch of skyscrapers, scaffolding, underground transportation, etc. You come to the city in the aftermath of an alien invasion, and it's up to you to acquire missions and handle them in such a way as to raise yourself to super-superhero status, basking in your fame and glory. This is a lot more "single-player minded" than most of the MMOGs out there. But this should not hurt the final player experience "Fortunately, our laudatory statues and personal satisfaction are not 'either/or items.' You can easily have both," says Cryptic Studios' Lead Designer Rick Dakan. "Still, we think people will appreciate the chance to have their character put up as an example for others to follow, even as they're earning experience, fame, and other personal advancements for their heroes."



"Fortunately, our laudatory statues and personal satisfaction are not 'either/or items.' You can easily have both."

While the setting *seems* directly out of a comic book, it is not modeled after any one world that we've seen before. "Paragon City is really a unique place that doesn't bear any particular resemblance to famous comic book cities," says Dakan. "First of all it is a city that is accustomed to having a couple of thousand super powered heroes operating at any given time, something slightly different than your average comic book setting. Moreover, it is a city still partially in ruins, We focused not so much on recreating our own versions of established settings, but rather on creating a city and world that was uniquely suited for our game."

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dx2: invisible war

One of the top games from two years ago, *Deus Ex*, was hard not to like. While it was flawed in a lot of ways, it also offered more freedom to solve problems and complete objectives than almost any game before. The conspiracy-laden plot was a little over the top, but smart dialog and fantastic gritty near-future urban settings made up for it. It was a spiritual successor to both *System Shock* and *Thief*, combining some of the best elements of both of those games. The sequel, *DX2: Invisible War*, aims to take everything good about the first game and do it better, while fixing all the problems. "We're pulling out all the stops," says Lead Designer Harvey Smith. "We've got next-gen tech for rendering and physics, our AI programmer is amazing, and we're trying to take the RPG-thriller gameplay to the next level...more freedom, more tension, more immersion, more consequence."

"...we're trying to take the RPG-thriller gameplay to the next level...more freedom, more tension, more immersion, more consequence."

If nothing else,

DX2 should be more immersive than almost any game out there. Take the latest Unreal engine and overhaul the rendering capabilities to add full-on real-time lighting and bump-mapped everything, then make every single object in the environment, big or small, susceptible to the powerful Havok physics engine. Tag on advanced new AI routines that will let characters recognize, comment about, and act on every little thing you do ("Stop staring at me!" or "Don't stand on my desk!" are real possibilities) and you've got one of the most ambitious games ever.

"...the whole game has been storyboarded from start to finish."

doom III

Hopefully by the time id Software's *DOOM III* is released, gamers will have bang-for-the-buck enough systems to be able to run it. id has always pushed the envelope when it came to system requirements, and probably if you looked back, you'd notice that at least one of your system upgrades happened in anticipation of the release of an id game. "The absolute minimum working specs for the *DOOM III* engine are either a GeForce or Radeon 7000," says Lead Designer Tim Willits. "Full-featured quality doesn't come into play until you reach a GeForce3 or Radeon 8500 on up. For us, the video card is actually more important than the CPU, although a high-end CPU certainly helps as well."

This "third coming" in the *DOOM* legacy, at least at this writing, appears to be ushering in a whole new era of 3D realism. As always, we're looking at a gritty, gore-filled, blood-encrusted romp through zombie land with tortured carcasses and glorious visions of dismemberment, disembowelment, evisceration, human vivisection, and other lovely tidbits. But if you're thinking, "Yawn...same-ol', same-ol'" think again. "There's a lot new," says Willits. "First, we contracted a professional writer—that's the first time id has done that. Second, the whole game has been storyboarded from start to finish. With that tool, it comes down to planning and organization. With the team of 17 talented people we have on this project, we have to make sure we're all working together." With all of this in mind, it's time to stash away those pennies to save up for that new NVIDIA card you'll be needing.

freelancer

Life has been tough for the space sim lately. Once the definition of "hot PC game" with titles like *Wing Commander* and *X-Wing*, even admirable space sims just don't get the respect they deserve in the marketplace anymore. Digital Anvil and Microsoft intend to change all that with *Freelancer*, a game of such enormous scope and production values that its oft-delayed status is almost forgivable. This game promises it all: an expansive living universe where factions battle, miners mine, and traders trade with or without your interference, all the time.

"Part space sim, part RPG, part adventure game, part action game."

But the real hook is the promised accessibility. Digital Anvil has worked very hard on creating an interface and heads-up display that anyone can handle, along with mouse-driven controls that take the frustration (and joystick requirement) out of space combat without removing the excitement. Lead Designer Jorg Neumann says *Freelancer* is, "Part space sim, part RPG, part adventure game, part action game. With Freelancer we're breaking all the rules and doing it beautifully." It looks like all those pieces are finally coming together for what could very well be the rebirth of a classic PC game genre.

full throttle 2

Full Throttle, the classic adventure game from LucasArts, will undergo a facelift in the year 2003 with the release of, get this, *Full Throttle II*. Tim Schafer's original game was a tale of corporate espionage and murder set in a mini-adventure format, with a few arcade sequences (gang fights and demolition derbying) thrown in to broaden its appeal. LucasArts describes this as a "free wheeling action-adventure that will offer a humorous original story, furious bare knuckle fighting, and the thrill of high speed biking."

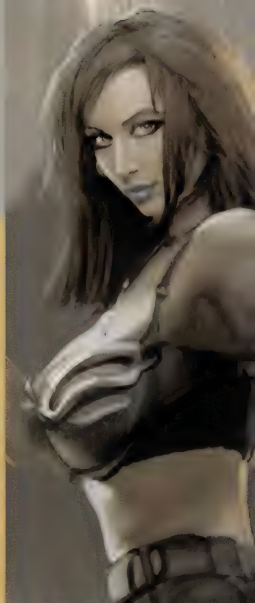
The hero will once again be Ben, who, for all his tough-guy appearance and mannerisms, was really a softie at heart. After all, he let a woman work on his bike while he was out on errands, and he recycled. "The first *Full Throttle* was hugely influential in the design for the sequel, much as you'd expect it to be," says Sean Cleark, the game's director. "In essence, we've used the first game as a reference point for many of our stylistic decisions. Ben is a very strong character who deserves more adventures, and the gritty world that we saw in the first game is a great place for those adventures to take place, so it makes sense to use this approach."

Clark's offbeat humor was apparent in the last *Monkey Island* game—a good thing, since this sequel will certainly require a piece of it. There are few specifics about it, as LucasArts has released little to no information and only lists "2003" as the release date.

"Ben is a very strong character who deserves more adventures, and the gritty world that we saw in the first game is a great place for those adventures to take place."

Revive away and make our day, LucasArts.

This was never my choice.



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lucky 13

halo

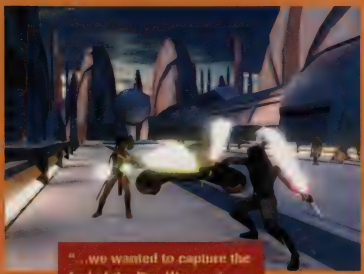
PC gamers have anticipated *Halo*'s arrival since its debut at MacWorld three years ago. Then the unthinkable happened: Microsoft bought Bungie and the notorious Mac and PC developer took its hottest property and turned it into an Xbox game. Next summer, 18 months after its console release, we'll finally get the shooter on the PC thanks to the porting efforts of Gearbox. After a year and a half of great PC shooters, will *Halo* hold up? Probably so, because *Halo* is nothing if not slightly off-kilter from your standard PC shooter. The variety of vehicles, always-available grenades and melee attacks, stellar combat AI, and unique twist of only being able to carry two weapons at a time will probably make Halo stand out from the crowded PC shooter scene as much in 2003 and the Xbox version did in 2001.

"The unique mix of weapons, ground and air vehicles, game modes, and huge outdoor and indoor environments are all available to create a most amazing on-line experience."

There will be obvious improvements like sharper textures, better overall resolution, and tighter mouse & keyboard control, but the biggest enhancement will be to the already riotously fun multiplayer. Gearbox President Randy Pitchford tells us, "Our goal is to make *Halo*'s on-line multiplayer component be the first choice for fans of on-line action games. The unique mix of weapons, ground and air vehicles, game modes, and huge outdoor and indoor environments are all available to create a most amazing on-line experience."

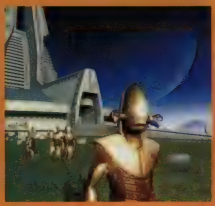
star wars knights of the old republic

When Bioware joined forces with LucasArts to develop its *Star Wars* role-playing game, *Knights of the Old Republic*, fans of *Baldur's Gate* et. al., rejoiced not only at its brand new story that takes place some 4000 years prior to Episode One, but at its new races, more than 50 ways of using Force powers, and its variety of "mini games." The game will also offer a universe spanning ten different worlds, including familiar favorites as well as completely new ones. You'll check into the spaceship Ebon Hawk, but you won't check out, as it serves as shelter during the off-hours, transportation during your deployment, and storage all around.



"...we wanted to capture the feel of the Star Wars universe with its grand vistas and beautiful landscapes."

"We are applying things we've learned from the *Baldur's Gate* series and *Neverwinter Nights* to make the quests more fun and compelling than ever before," says LucasArts Producer Casey Hudson, but what will help to alleviate the feeling that this is something that will just shriek "Baldur's Gate III" at every turn? Well, according to Producer Mike Gallo, there will be several things. "The view in the game is completely different than any of the games in the *Baldur's Gate* series," he says. "The camera is lower, to give the player a view of the characters and party that they've never seen before. Most importantly, we wanted to capture the feel of the *Star Wars* universe with its grand vistas and beautiful landscapes. This obviously created some other challenges in the design and game control departments, but we're confident that players will be happy with the results!"



rise of nations

Brian Reynolds is one of the great unsung heroes of PC gaming. He brought us *Colonization*, *Civilization II*, and *Alpha Centauri*, but was rarely able to step out of the sizeable shadow of Sid Meier until he started his own company, Big Huge Games. So when he says, "We are creating a game for everyone who ever wished to see more strategic depth in their RTS games," we listen. We listen *well*. The game he's talking about is their debut title, *Rise of Nations*, and it promises to bring some of the territorial battle and large scale, long term planning of games like *Civilization* to the *Age of Empires* milieu. This could truly be a case of "you got your peanut butter in my chocolate," where the combination of two great games, mixed together just so, produces a whole greater than its parts. If there's anyone we'd trust to pull it off, it's Brian Reynolds.

"...a game for everyone who ever wished to see more strategic depth in their RTS games."

star wars galaxies

When *Star Wars Galaxies: An Empire Divided* was initially announced, not only were the *Star Wars* junkies psyched, the entire massively multiplayer online gaming community was bowled over as well. This joint venture with Sony Interactive brings the experienced designers of *EverQuest* into the world of George Lucas' Empire. They do intend to differentiate it from the rest of the games on the market, though. "Probably the most significant feature that we've avoided for *Star Wars Galaxies* is the use of strict 'levels' familiar to so many other games," says Producer Haden Blackman. "*Galaxies* uses a skill-based character advancement system, which allows players greater control over the development of their characters. We also avoid a situation where players are segregated and stratified by their relative experience level. Instead, any group of characters can fruitfully join forces, and it's likely that each character will bring different skills to the table."

"Probably the most significant feature that we've avoided is the use of strict 'levels' familiar to so many other games."

Story continuity has a lot to do with which characters you will encounter in the game. For example, they cannot include Obi-Wan, because he's already been killed by Darth Vader, but Jabba is still alive so he will appear, as will Luke, Han, Leia, and Vader. "In most cases, the 'named' NPCs will be providing missions for player characters," explains Blackman, "although we do have special circumstances where an NPC might be an enemy. The game will also be full of "unnamed" NPCs, like Tusken Raiders, who will serve as enemies as well."

With weird mounts to ride, the possibility of vehicular add-ons, and the ability to become a Jedi yourself, it doesn't get a whole lot more enticing than this.

Some times...

war is inevitable.

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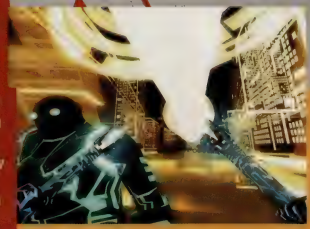
tron 2.0

years after the original Tron hit theaters, it's finally getting a sequel. The thing is, it's not a movie. Disney started the resurrection of the *Tron* franchise with the 20th anniversary DVD last year and will take it to the next logical step with the release of *Tron 2.0*, developed by what is rapidly becoming the premiere shooter developer, Monolith. A new movie, tentatively titled *Tron: Killer App*, is sort of in pre-production, but you can put it out of your mind—if the *Tron* arcade games made a lot more money and garnered more fame than the movie, it's only right that we consider the new game the true sequel.

"The film *Tron* centers on a society of programs operating inside the computer," says lead designer Frank Rooke, "battling for their lives and the freedom of other programs on game grids, which translates naturally into a computer game." One look at the game and you know it's going to be something different. "[It] takes advantage of this unique premise and offers a refreshing departure from the gritty hyperrealism seen in other first person action games," he adds, and that's exactly what makes it interesting.

Monolith's game uses what they call the Triton engine, a version of the Jupiter system that powers *No One Lives Forever 2*, only with some fancy special effects added. Chief among these is the glow effect that makes the game look as electric as the film, and though it was co-developed with NVIDIA, it should run on any video card that can handle pixel shaders.

"[It] takes advantage of this unique premise and offers a refreshing departure from the gritty hyperrealism seen in other first person action games."



As Jet Bradley, son of Alan (creator of the original Tron program), you'll once again be digitized into the world of Tron, but a lot has changed in 20 years. You'll visit locations like firewalls, the "Progress Bar," PDAs, Internet hubs, and even the old computer systems from the original film. You'll toss around an upgradeable disc weapon and take down corrupted programs with other primitives: the sphere, mesh, and rod. And yes, you'll hop on an all-new light cycle, designed by Syd Mead, the famous designer that worked on the original film, as well as *Blade Runner*. Multiplayer fans will be happy to hear that they'll toss discs against their online buddies in an online arena reminiscent of the *Rocket Arena* mod for *Quake* games, so there's a lot more to look forward to than an impressive single-player game, especially if you're a fan of the *Discs of Tron* arcade classic.

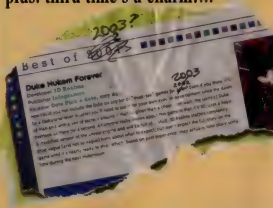
world of warcraft

Did anyone think that Blizzard Entertainment would not jump onto the bandwagon with today's proliferation of massively multiplayer games? *World of Warcraft* will try to bring the streamlined-yet-still-sophisticated gameplay that has been Blizzard's trademark to a land in which you can control just one of the characters that you have been lassoing and ordering around for many years. "The world is very much shaped by the backstory of *Warcraft*, taking place a few years after the events of *WarCraft III*," says Team Lead Mark Kern. "Players who have played our real-time strategy games will recognize entire lands, battlefields, and heroes. Even the buildings and towns will be familiar, right down to the little peasant trains hauling gold or lumber between townships."

While we know that designers are trying to set this game apart from its contemporaries, it's not an easy thing to do with the immense scope of material already out there. What will work? "It really can't be distilled down to one thing," explains Kern, "but it's rather the combination of many elements. The beauty of the art, the layout of the world, the design of the creatures, the balance of the combat, the depth of the character development, the variety of the quests, the facility of the UI, the richness of the audio, the attention to detail, and a hundred other factors, both large and small, all contribute to making the World of Warcraft a truly epic experience." Think he studied marketing? Despite a 2003 release date, Blizzard will most likely adhere to its "when it's done" paradigm, and that's (probably) a good thing.

"Players who have played our real-time strategy games will recognize entire lands, battlefields, and heroes."

plus: third time's a charm?...



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GAMEZONE, EDITORS' CHOICE
GONE GOLD, PLATINUM AWARD
GAME PEN, NUMB THUMB AWARD
GAMESPOT, GAME OF THE MONTH
ALLOUTGAMES, SEAL OF APPROVAL
LOADEDINC, HOT PROPERTY AWARD
ACTION TRIP, EDITORS' CHOICE
VOODOO EXTREME, CAN-O WHOOPASS
ZEN GAMER, GOLD ZEN AWARD
RPGDOT, EDITORS' CHOICE
XISTENZE, CHOICE AWARD
VN ROUNDUP, STAMP OF APPROVAL
WORTHPLAYING.COM, EDITORS' CHOICE
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RP

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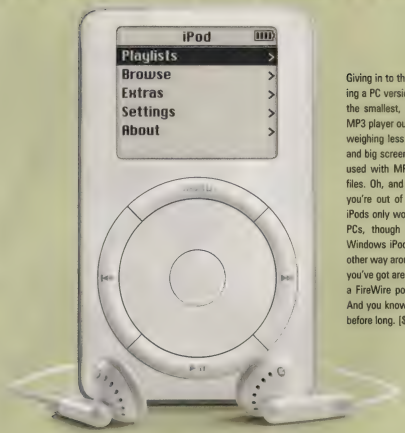
geeky gear for the cyber-savvy

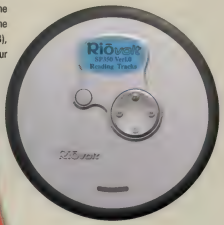
As inevitable as the patch that fixes the bug you encountered in your first five minutes with the latest blockbuster, it's the time of the year when you're forced to figure out the interests of all of your so-called friends, or relatives, or spouses, or various paid lackeys, hangers-on, etc. Or alternately, they're trying to figure out what you want. Since we normally cover a lot of those game-like things in each issue—and let's face it, you probably already know what you want on that front—we decided to single out some unusual and not-so-unusual gear that ranges from the seriously cool (the Windows version of the iPod) to the seriously stupid (a SexyMouse?).

At just a little larger than a Zippo lighter, you won't find a wealth of controls on Creative's **Nomad MuVo** (actual size, left), just forward, back, play/pause, and volume. But simplicity is what it's all about. There's no software to install—just slide out the player section from the battery section and jam it into a USB port, and it'll show up as a removable drive. Drag 'n' drop up to 64MB of Windows Media or MP3 files there for listening, or drop any other file to transport it to another computer. On the other end of the spectrum lies the **Nomad Jukebox 3** (above), a 20GB or 40GB portable MP3 player with both USB and Firewire connectivity. It's a little smaller than a portable CD player and features a relatively simple interface, although its less elegant than what's found on the iPod. Creative's bundled software is ghastly, with overly designed interfaces and pointless splash screens that pop up on Windows startup. Thank God it works with Media Player, which, even in its slightly convoluted state, is better than Creative's stuff. [$129-$499, www.creative.com]



Giving in to the overwhelming demand, Apple is now releasing a PC version of its popular **iPod** (actual size), and it's still the smallest, prettiest, most user-friendly hard drive based MP3 player out there. Barely bigger than a deck of cards and weighing less than seven ounces, the large wheel interface and big screen make it easy to use. Provided it's exclusively used with MP3s, as the iPod won't play Windows Media files. Oh, and it's FireWire-only, so if all you have is USB, you're out of luck. And it's not cross-compatible, so Mac iPods only work on Macs and Windows iPods only work on PCs, though quite conveniently Apple made a way for Windows iPods to be converted into Mac units (but not the other way around). Okay, so it has some drawbacks, but if all you've got are MP3s and you only want to use it on a PC with a FireWire port anyway it's one great digital music player. And you know those PC hackers will extend its functionality before long. [$299-$499, www.apple.com]

Want something that holds more songs than a standard MP3 player but is cheaper than a hard drive-based one? The **RioVolt SP350** (right) plays regular audio CDs as well as MP3 and Windows Media files burned on CD-R and CD-RWs. The new version improves on last year's model by including the formerly extra-cost car kit for free, plus it offers 32 minutes of skip protection and improved headphones. It still includes an FM tuner, a remote, and a carrying case, and software upgrades to past models added support for WinAmp playlists. On the downsized front, the **Rio S35S** (actual size, below) is the latest version of the player that started the entire portable MP3 craze. Though not quite as cool as the MuVo, it's still small enough to attach to your wrist, has 128MB of memory (upgradable to 256MB), includes a clock and stopwatch, and has an FM tuner for those days when you can't live without your sanitized corporate radio. [$179-$199, www.sonicblue.com]



10 under $10

Like a fine wine, great games don't go bad with age, they just get patched. Not only can you buy five of these games for the price of one brand-new triple-A hit, but they'll run fine on older computers. Find them on the bargain rack at your local retailer.

Aliens Versus Predator Gold
Patches to the first made it a much better game than it shipped, and it's still good enough to make you jump out of your seat. It's certainly better than *Primal Hunt* for the sequel.

The Curse of Monkey Island
Snappy cel-shaded animation and a talking skull named Murray make the third *Monkey Island* game better than the fourth installment.

Dungeon Keeper 2
It's part environment sim, part real-time strategy, all funny. Be the bad guy and crush the do-gooders!

Grim Fandango
Still one of the best adventure games of the last decade. For extra-good boys, find a walkthrough online, print it out, and stuff it in the box. Just in case.

Homeworld Cataclysm
This stand-alone product is easily confused for a *Homeworld* add-on, but it doesn't require the original. It is, however, every bit as good.

Jedi Knight: Dark Forces II
One of the greatest shooters of all time, and a pretty fun online game to boot. If your old rig can't handle *Jedi Knight II*, the force is with the original.

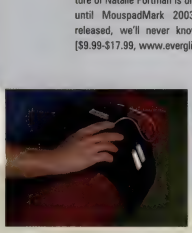
Serious Sam
You don't need to splurge for *Second Edition* when the first is almost the exact same thing. Pure arcade blast-'em-up fun, it's like a first-person *Robotron*.

StarCraft
For all of the people out there who haven't played it (both of you), this is still one of the best real-time strategy games ever made, and different enough from *WarCraft III* not to be ignored in favor of Blizzard's latest.

Typing of the Dead
It's the best first-person typing shooter ever made. Worth $10 just to laugh at the opening scenes where people shoot zombies with keyboards and Dreamcasts on their backs.

X-Wing Alliance
The last great X-Wing sim. Enough said.

Being the "Ultimate Mousepad" seems to have as much importance as being the premiere nose-picker in the world, but there's just a little something about the stylish mousepads from **EverGlide** that bring out the uber-geek in the geekiest of geeks. Maybe it's the shapes, or the patterns (designed for optical mice, apparently), or the texture of the pad itself, but they just work. Whether they work better than your desk, a piece of paper, or a picture of Natalie Portman is unknown. And until MouspadMark 2003 is finally released, we'll never know for sure. [$9.99-$17.99, www.everglide.com]



The **Armchair Mousepad** is for the lazy gamer who wants to deathmatch from the comfort of his or her Lay-Z-Boy. As you might guess from the name, it's a mousepad that attaches to the arm of a chair. You may think it's dumb today, but with wireless networking and gaming laptops taking off… it may be essential tomorrow. Now if they could hook up with EverGlide… [$19.95, www.gizmojockey.com]

Anyone who's tried to move their computer has probably said to themselves, "there's got to be a better way to do this." Enter the **GearGrip** accessories from CaseAce. Strong Velcro straps wrap around your computer or monitor with a soft durable handle up top to make carrying easy. Some models have pockets on the side for your keyboard, mouse, cables, etc. It's a simple idea done right that really reduces the stress of lugging your PC to your buddy's house. [$19.95 - $39.95, www.caseace.com]

It's about time clothing got wired. At least that's the theory behind the **SCOTTeVEST**, a "technology enabled" jacket. Sporting more zippers than a leather fetish convention and more pockets than a marsupial petting zoo, it's surprisingly stylish. So what makes it "technology enabled?" Consider the "conduit" system to run wires from your MP3 or CD player to the loops that hold your earphones in place, or the storage area for your pocket PC or Gameboy, the one for power supplies, another for magazines… basically, it's the only jacket that requires a manual to operate. By wearing this jacket, it's virtually guaranteed that you'll be the uber-geek wherever you go. Now where did you put that pack of gum…. [$139.99, www.scottevest.com]

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10 you may have missed

Sure, everyone knows about or remembers the *WarCraft IIIs* or the *Neverwinter Nights'*, but what about the games that fell through the cracks?

Age of Wonders II: The Wizard's Throne
One of the best games released this year, this turn-based stunner sports more pure gameplay than most of the games on this list combined.

Command & Conquer Renegade
It's hard to imagine "missing" any *Command & Conquer* game, but this one kind of left the public eye almost immediately after shipping. Multiplayer, in particular, is still worth your time.

Disciples II: Dark Prophecy
Released very early in the year, this is the game *Heroes of Might and Magic IV* is trying to be. It's polished, looks good, and has a ton of gameplay.

Duke Nukem Manhattan Project
A simple, fun, inexpensive, side-scrolling throwback, and the only place you'll see Duke again in your lifetime. Probably.

Global Operations
It's very *Counter-strike*, yes, and the net code wasn't great at launch, but patches improved play considerably. Too bad no one's playing it.

Laser Squad Nemesis
The creators of *X-COM* go purely online. Fans of turn-based tactical combat should try this out at www.lasersquadnemesis.com.

Schizm: Mysterious Journey
There haven't been many good adventure games lately; this is one of them. It's a must-have for fans of *Myst*.

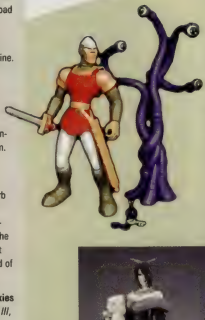
Star Trek Bridge Commander
X-Wing creator Larry Holland's superb simulator came and went, but not because of a lack of quality. Its cinematic qualities captured the feel of the Trek universe, and outstanding AI let you to feel like a commander instead of a pilot.

Starships Unlimited: Divided Galaxies
If you're waiting for *Master of Orion III*, you might want to give this a try. It's 4X space strategy at its best-nimble, elegant, and addictive. Check it out at www.apezone.com.

Warlord Battlecry 2
Possibly the year's best real-time strategy game, SSG continues to update this sleeper, adding 13 new downloadable scenarios, new music, and a new side AI. Amazing.

Fantasy Flight Games has been cleverly mucking about for a number of years now, bringing role-playing and fantasy games based on various intellectual properties into your living rooms, basements, and convention centers. Some of its newest games for this season are **A Game of Thrones**, a collectible card game based on George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* fantasy novels; the **Call of Cthulhu Nocturne** RPG campaign; and most highly anticipated, the latest expansion for its series of popular Tolkien games, **Lord of the Rings: Sauron**. This version puts you in the roles of the hobbits Merry, Pippin, Fatty, and Frodo, on their quest to destroy the One Ring. Requiring the original boardgame to play, you'll work cooperatively across four boards to overcome challenges and attempt to prevent the Ringbearer from being corrupted. [$19.95 - $44.95, www.fantasyflightgames.com]

As New Line's second installment of the huge *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy releases worldwide this holiday season, there are four additions to the **Two Towers Action Figures** set. Joining Elf Archer and Berserker Urk-Hai, Grishnach and Merry, and Ugluk and Pippin are Legolas, Faramir, a Gondorian Ranger, and an Easterling Warrior. The six-inch, deluxe, fully-poseable figures come complete with accessories and are based upon real-scan molds. [$9.95-$21.95, www.theonering.com]



Since 1983, *Dragon's Lair* merchandise has come in many forms, from books to binoculars and guns to game tutorials. With the advent of *Dragon's Lair 3D*, Digital Leisure has released action figures of **Dirk the Daring**, **Princess Daphne**, **Singe**, and the evil **Mordroc**. The set contains all four sturdy, well-articulated figures, plus accessories such as Dirk's Eyeball Tentacle Creature, and Daphne's Fire Drake. Detailed yet simplistic in design, these figures should last through the next century. [$29.95, www.digitalleisure.com]

The large variety of **Final Fantasy X Action Figures** will give collectors quite a run for their money this holiday season. There are both fixed-pose and fully-poseable figures with varying degrees of detail. They are intricately costumed, and some have thin and pliable material for pants and elbow armor that allow for freer movement of joints and a more realistic physique. They range in height from 6 1/2 to 14 1/2 inches, and most come with accessories that befit their faithfully recreated characterization, such as Kimahri Lonzo's oversized spear, and Lulu's animated doll weapon, Mog. [$12.99-$34.99, ccls.diamondcomics.com]

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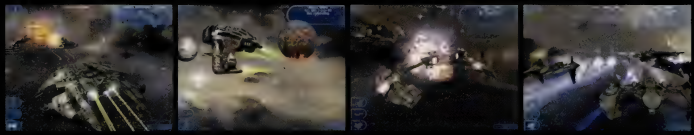

"...promises to breath new life into the deathly quiet genre of sci-fi 3D RTS gaming...one of the best looking games on the E3 showroom floor." - *GAMESPY*

"...the game simply looks gorgeous and also plays very well to boot." - *HOMELAN*

www.hegemonia.info

TEEN T VIOLENCE ESRB

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DREAMCATCHER

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Eager to capitalize on the success of the new Monorail, town residents are buying up Springfield, *Monopoly* style in **Simpson's Monopoly**. It includes customized money and game board; Monorail Stops and Monorail Stations replace houses and hotels and the Chance and Community Chest cards. Also, one of the world's most challenging puzzles mixes with one of the world's most challenged men with the **Rubik's Simpson's Homer Puzzle**. Twist and turn Homer's head to your heart's content. Of course the original had all those pretty colors, but Homer definitely has…that five o'clock shadow. [$11.99-$34.99, www.winning-moves.com, www.usaopoly.com]

Cheapass Games, dedicated more to entertainment than aesthetics, is releasing four new games this season. **Freeloader** is a quick-playing board game "for 3-6 losers." You drift through the neighborhood accumulating free stuff from your friends. **Fightball** is a card game that explores the world of a ruthless future sport. **Lord of the Fries** is undergoing a makeover. Set at the fast food restaurant of the damned where everyone is a zombie and there's only one brain to pass around, it's now appearing in full color. Finally, **Diceland. Deep White Sea** is a tabletop combat game that uses paper dice as the characters. The game system is original, and the dice are eight-sided, printed in full color, and about two inches per side. Cheapass has been nominated for a total of 23 Origins Awards, the highest honor bestowed by the US Hobby Game industry. Have they won any? You can bet your Cheapass on it. [$7.50-$14.95, www.cheapass.com]

shop 'till you drop

Or at least until your fingers bleed. Here are a few online shopping destinations for the cyber junkie.

COMPUTERGEAR
A store for serious geekiness. [www.computergear.com]

RPGWEAR
Your life won't be complete until you broadcast your love of *EverQuest* to the world via a T-shirt. [www.rpgwear.com]

THINGS YOU NEVER KNEW EXISTED…
…and for a very good reason. Do you like shopping at Spencer Gifts? Find the stuff that lingers (for years) on the bottom shelf of that fine mall chain at this website. [www.johnsonsmith.com]

THINK GEEK
The epicenter of all things geeky. Hardware, caffeine, you name it, it has it. [www.thinkgeek.com]

For those looking to "blow" a set of speakers without trashing their tweeter, the **Revo HotAir Inflatable Portable Speaker System** is what aural dreams are made of. It is, by far, the finest inflatable speaker system on the market, producing rich, deep… well, it generates noise that mostly resembles the source material. But they are small, portable, good for a few laughs, and can be used as floatation devices. Oh wait, the box specifically says you can't use them for that, damn. [$45, www.ellula.com]

Fashioned after the Venus D'Milo, just in case you thought it had no class, the **SexyMouse** (not actual size) may put a little excitement in your "point 'n' click." The naked body mouse includes adapters for PS/2 and serial ports, and is fully compatible with all systems and major applications. Right and left click your way to paradise as each mouse comes with a six foot extended cable that hints at a far more extendable you. [$19.95, www.kopes.com]

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- Bend sensor and optical-tracking technology gives true-to-life mobility.
- Easy, plug-and-play set-up.

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software etc GameStop spgames.com Multisensory Solutions

PC CD-ROM

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90 out of 100 "A feast for the eyes and mind, an excellent game and a perfect example of what an MMORPG should be."
Matt Leyendecker, ActionTrip.com
9.5 out of 10 "Totally absorbing, a game that I'll be playing long after this review is posted."
Jason MacIsaac, Electric Playground
GOOD NEWS
"Earth & Beyond continues to impress with great graphics and great gameplay."
Jeff Green, Computer Gaming World
"...Earth & Beyond shows a lot of style and a lot of vision."
Chris Hudak Computer Games Magazine
"Earth & Beyond should offer the hardcore sci-fi crowd the persistent-world game they've been waiting for."
Rob Smith, Editor-in Chief, PC Gamer
TEEN
T
EGAD INTERACTIVE
Blood
Violence
The content of this game may change due to interactive exchanges.

91 out of 100 "Best MMORPG ever? Very possibly."
Jakub Wojnarowicz, Firing Squad
FIRING SQUAD
9.3 out of 10 "As far as MMO games go you really don't get much better than this."
Paul Younger, Loadedinc.com
TRAVELS AT LIGHTSPEED.
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TECHNICALITIES

when will 3D really matter?

Gamers can't live without it, but the mass market ignores it

The PC games market has never been more healthy. 2001 should have been a horrible year for PC games, financially. New PC sales took a nosedive, the economy was bad, and all the marketing and mass-media attention was placed squarely on the launch of two new console systems (Xbox and Gamecube), the incumbent system they challenged (PS2), and the new lord of handheld gaming (Game Boy Advance). What's more, the general quality of game releases was a bit on the poor side, with some notable exceptions. By all accounts, overall PC game sales should have slumped big-time.

But according to NPDTechworld, sales volume was up from 62.9 million to 65.3 million, about a 4% jump. Dollar sales saw a similar leap, from $1.36 billion to $1.42 billion. All those games, even in a "weak" year, and all I can think is "where are the 3D games?"

If you're reading this magazine, you probably think I'm smoking crack. 3D games are everywhere. Gamers have been buying video cards with 3D acceleration for ages. Hell, we went out of our way to buy video cards that didn't do anything but 3D acceleration back in the days of the Voodoo2. The magazine you're holding, and others like it, regularly focus most of their attention on games with some pretty slick 3D graphics. When it comes to games, 3D is definitely king. Or is it? Let's take a look at the numbers. The 20 top-selling games of last year were as follows:

1. The Sims
2. RollerCoaster Tycoon
3. Harry Potter & The Sorcerer's Stone
4. Diablo II Expansion: Lord of Destruction
5. The Sims: House Party Expansion
6. The Sims: Livin' Large Expansion
7. The Sims: Hot Date Expansion
8. Diablo II
9. Sim Theme Park
10. Age Of Empires II: Age of Kings
11. Black & White
12. Frogger
13. Roller Coaster Tycoon Loopy Landscapes
14. Command & Conquer: Red Alert 2
15. Backyard Basketball
16. SimCity 3000 Unlimited
17. Backyard Baseball 2001
18. Age Of Empires II: The Conquerors
19. Max Payne
20. SimCity 3000

Those games probably account for half of the 65 million games sold last year. Of everything on that list, only two actually require real 3D acceleration, *Max Payne* and *Black & White*. Two whole games! What's going on here? Why are all the big sellers ignoring 3D acceleration?

The general theory from the suits is that one of the reasons those games are so successful is because they don't need a fancy high-end machine to run, and that assumes 3D acceleration. Okay, that seems logical, but I think it assumes a causal relationship where there's only a correlation. The processor and RAM requirements for the games above are fairly slim, but still steep enough that anyone who has the CPU and RAM required to run them probably also has a card with reasonable 3D acceleration. I would submit that most of the games on the list above are breakout hits because they're accessible, easy-to-play games that in many cases relate in some way to real life or pop culture. Or they're from Blizzard.

This focus on avoiding 3D acceleration seems to fly in the face of the fact that all the hit console games are 3D. You have to look long and hard to find a 2D game on a console system these days at all, let alone a popular one. The experience of "quality 3D" is obviously a selling point. I think PC game publishers and developers are just afraid to embrace it in games that are made for a wide audience. When I look at the equipment in a $799 PC from six months ago, I think they can give up that fear.

And perhaps they are. Mass-market targeted titles are starting to require 3D acceleration. *Age of Mythology* is an obvious example, but *SimCity 4* is a better one. The top 20 list for this year, I predict, will be almost half-filled with games requiring 3D acceleration. The rest will be Sims expansions. The 3D push should have been harder, though. Last year's list should be almost full of games requiring 3D acceleration: better looking games that stand up better next to the latest console fare. I honestly think that one of the reasons PC games aren't selling as fast as their console cousins is because the mass-market games don't deliver enough "wow" factor, and the PC games that have the "wow" factor are too hard to play or too esoteric for the mass market. •

TIP OF THE MONTH

Startup applications list – If you've ever run msconfig to disable annoying resource-hogging startup applications, and were confronted with a bunch of weird names that are totally meaningless and confusing, this site is for you. Head to www.pcpc-portal.co.uk/startup_pages/startup_full.htm for a pretty complete list of all those strange startup items, what they do, and whether or not you can safely remove them.

Q Everyone talks about updating drivers for video cards, and I've read about updating drivers for sound cards, but how important is it to update drivers for everything else? Motherboards, monitors, etc.?

Also, how important is the quality of the monitor? Other than getting a non-flat monitor and the size, are monitors that different? When upgrading a video card or overall system, can you use the same monitor?

I am thinking about getting a new computer, but I have so many programs on my current computer that the thought of having to start over is quite daunting. Is there a way for a non-technically savvy person to transfer files (MP3s, photos, saved documents, etc.) from the hard drive in one computer to a new computer? Also, if I go from Windows 98SE to Windows Me in the new computer, would the programs from the old computer that were "created" with 98SE still be able to run?

Greg R.

A Lots of good questions there, Greg. First, it's extremely important to have the most up to date drivers for everything. Monitors typically only have one .inf file that describes them, and it's rarely updated, but out of date motherboard drivers can cause incompatibilities, poor performance, you name it. Similarly, updated firmware for CD-ROMs and such can add new capabilities or make them work better with some software. Even new keyboard or mouse drivers can add features and fix bugs. Always keep all your drivers current, not just the video and sound card.

For regular tube-style (CRT) monitors, there's honestly not nearly as much difference in quality as there used to be. Even cheap CRTs have quite good clarity, brightness, and supported resolutions/refresh rates these days. When you upgrade your computer, or any part of it, you absolutely can use the same monitor. In fact, I would recommend spending a little more on a really good large monitor, with the intention of keeping it through several upgrades. The same goes for speakers, by the way.

If you're getting a new computer, it will almost surely come with Windows XP, not Windows Me, and that's a good thing. The easiest way to transfer all your files and documents would be to use a CD-R drive to burn them onto a few CDs, and then simply copy them from the CD onto the hard drive of your new computer. There are a great many archival and backup utilities out there, but if you're moving to a new operating system and a clean slate, they're not always best for the task. If you want to save items from your email program, use its "export" feature. You're going to have to re-install your programs on the new computer, but almost all of them should work fine: the money you've invested in your software won't go to waste.

Q Is it beneficial these days with an operating system such as Windows XP to reboot after playing a large game such as *Soldier Of Fortune II*, before I start a session of lets say, *Civilization III*? I am hoping that rebooting after each gaming session is a thing of the past and I can finally let go of the habit.

Alan T.

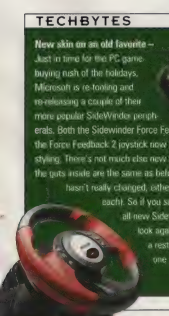
A Windows XP does a pretty good job of clearing out the memory a program uses when it quits, even in many of the cases of poorly-behaved programs that have memory leaks or other problems. There's very little benefit to rebooting after each gaming session. I personally leave my Windows XP computer at home running for weeks on end without rebooting.

Q I want to upgrade to Windows XP, but I've heard many people complaining they cant view Java web sites and a few others. Is there a way of installing Windows XP without IE 6? Also, can IE 5.5 work with Win XP? I visit a lot of Java enabled sites, and I don't want to install an OS that won't permit me to view certain web sites.

Fred

A Well, there's Java and there's JavaScript. JavaScript is far more common, and it works just fine with IE 6. There's no way I know of to install Windows XP without IE 6 or to "downgrade" to IE 5.5, but don't worry. All you have to do to run Java programs in IE 6 is go to Sun's website at java.sun.com and download its own Java Virtual Machine.

TECHBYTES



New skin on an old favorite – Just in time for the PC game buying rush of the holidays, Microsoft is re-tooling and re-releasing a couple of their more popular SideWinder peripherals. Both the Sidewinder Force Feedback Wheel and the Force Feedback 2 joystick now feature sporty red styling. There's not much else new about them: though the guts inside are the same as before and the price hasn't really changed, either (they're $100 each). So if you see what looks like an all new Sidewinder in the store, look again. It's probably just a restyled version of the one you've already got.

Faster graphics memory with GDDR-3 – The problem with using traditional graphics technologies like DDR and DDR-2 for graphics chips is that they're developed with general computing needs in mind. The JEDEC, the committee that ratifies these standards, also moves too slowly for a graphics industry that wants to put out new product twice a year. So it looks like the graphics guys are doing their own thing now. ATI recently announced that, along with the world's leading DRAM vendors and with input from other graphics vendors, it has completed the third DDR specification, called GDDR-3.

Traditional DDR provides clock speeds up to about 400MHz, and GDDR-3 will start out at about 500MHz and scale up to 800MHz (we're talking "DDR" speeds here). In that regard it's similar to DDR-2, which we'll see in graphics cards pretty soon now and in systems late in 2003. But there are a few differences in the two technologies. GDDR-3 will use single-ended, unidirectional strobe that separates the reads and writes. DDR-2, by contrast, uses differential bi-directional strobes. It also uses a "pseudo-open drain" interface technique that is based on voltage rather than current, which makes it possible for graphics chips to be made that are compatible with DDR, DDR-2, and GDDR-3. All this technical mumbo-jumbo means that GDDR-3 is better suited for the kinds of point-to-point connections where a graphics chip talks directly to RAM, rather than going through a bus (as DDR and DDR-2 is optimized for). In contrast to DDR-2, the new memory type should more cheaply scale to higher frequencies and use a little less power as well, a benefit to laptops. We'll probably see graphics cards using GDDR-3 late in 2003.

GOING FLAT

WITH PRICES FALLING AND QUALITY RISING, IT MIGHT BE TIME TO DITCH THAT TUBE MONITOR AND GO WITH STYLISHLY THIN LCD

by Jason Cross

If television and movies are to be believed, just about everyone in the world has a three-inch-deep liquid crystal display (LCD) flat-panel monitor. But TV and movies are big fat liars–they use LCD monitors because they look great and are a lot easier to schlep around the set. Most of the world still uses big bulky CRT monitors, which weigh five to ten times as much and use at least twice the electricity as an LCD. Flat-panel monitors have other benefits: they're far crisper than most CRTs and they don't draw the screen in horizontal scan lines linked to a refresh rate but rather draw the whole screen at once at a locked rate of 60Hz, effectively eliminating any and all flickering. And when an LCD monitor says it's 17 inches, it's all picture from edge to edge, unlike tube monitors that have a tube size and a "viewable area" an inch or two shorter. A 17 or 18" LCD has the same screen size as a 19" CRT.

With all the apparent benefits of flat-panel monitors, why not make the switch? For starters, they're still about twice as expensive as a good CRT. What's more, there are still some visual quality issues, especially where games are concerned [see sidebar]. Whether or not these problems bother you enough to steer you from the benefits of an LCD is a matter of personal taste, but if you're ready to take the plunge, we're here to help.

When looking at a flat-panel monitor, the specs are definitely important, but if you ask LCD experts what they feel is important, the response is unanimous: trust your eyes, not the numbers. Resolution is important in the context of making images scale better, but so is the quality of the monitor's scaling circuitry. The monitor should have uniform lighting throughout with no bright or dark patches. Whites should be white instead of having a colored tinge, and blacks should be very black and not dark gray. Pixel response time is crucial. Is it a sleek piece of kit that will make your friends and coworkers jealous, or is it a thin, flat eyesore? Does it have a video input for a TV or game console, and how about a USB hub? Many factors go into choosing an LCD monitor, and the best thing you can do is try before you buy.

HERCULES PROPHETVIEW 920

The big brother to last year's 15" Hercules LCD monitor is the ProphetView 920, a 17" model that shares its younger sibling's sleek styling. It's an extremely slim display, taking up even less desk space than most, and its metallic blue exterior adds a splash of color without distracting. The monitor looks pretty good using the standard DVI hookup (a DVI to VGA adaptor is included), but the lighting isn't entirely even. The image gets slightly darker toward the top of the screen, and we had a hard time adjusting the colors to give us both nice dark blacks and accurate bright colors at the same time, though the on-screen display controls are quite good. The fast response time makes this one of one of the better game-playing monitors, with blurring in fast-action games apparent but minimal. The ProphetView 920 is slim on amenities: there's no telescoping stand, no USB hub, no speakers. The composite video input is a nice touch, but we couldn't get a crisp and stable picture, so it's not going to make your Xbox or PS2 shine.

RATING ★★★½☆

PHILIPS BRILLIANCE 180P2

Sometimes a monitor tries to be all things to all people and ends up being nothing to anyone. Such is the case with the Brilliance 180P2, a large 18" display with what Philips refers to as a "multimedia base," their fancy way of saying "speakers and microphone." The sound quality is poor enough that you wouldn't want to use them, and they're so close together that it kills stereo separation. There are two inputs, both analog VGA and digital DVI, but no s-video or composite video input, which is a shame considering the multimedia base. Perhaps it's just as well, because the image quality isn't very good. The panel just couldn't seem to lock in on the signal from our video card very well, resulting in odd two-inch-wide bands of alternating sharpness and blurriness when viewing desktop graphics. Endlessly playing with the phase lock controls just couldn't quite make it go away. Gray levels could be better, and the scaler is only average–you'd want to stick to the native resolution if at all possible.

RATING ★★☆☆☆

PHILIPS 150MT

The smaller of the two Philips displays here is far more interesting, but just as hard to recommend. The 150MT is a pretty small monitor at only 15", with a meager resolution of 1024x768. It's very bright with good contrast and a zippy response time, but image quality is marred by slightly uneven lighting and at a native resolution this low, no scaling technology in the world is going to keep the screen from turning into a blurry mess when running at 640x480 or 800x600. Input is only through a VGA connector–there's no DVI. While the screen itself doesn't impress, the bonus features are worth crowing about. There's both composite and s-video input, plus full-on YUV component input to get the most from your DVD player or game console. There's even a cable-ready TV tuner and a handy remote control so you can watch the boob tube without running up to your desk to flip the channels. Philips even thought to include line output and headphone jacks on the side. It's a shame to see so many great features paired with a small, low-res screen with slightly uneven lighting. It's even worse to ask an astounding $900 for it, almost as much as much larger 18" panels.

RATING ★★½☆☆

BENQ FP2081

The lord and master of this roundup is undoubtedly BenQ's FP2081. This giant 20" screen absolutely dominates your desk without taking up an obscene amount of space. The wide border is a little bit of an eyesore, but you get over it quickly when you see how good the screen looks. Blacks are black, whites are white, and colors are vibrant and accurate. The quality scaler combined with a native resolution of 1600x1200 makes text and images look good at almost any resolution. The 25ms response time delivers games that, while not as clean as a CRT, were some of the sharpest seen on an LCD. The on-screen display controls are great, even including picture in picture, and though there's no phase lock adjustment, in all our tests the FP2081 never needed any tweaking at all. It even gave us a perfectly jitter-free picture when we plugged an Xbox into the S-Video input (composite video input is there as well). The price is definitely steep, almost twice as much as most 19" monitors, but this is an envy-inducing monitor if there ever was one, and if you have the means, it's worth it.

Computer Games EDITOR'S CHOICE

RATING ★★★★½

CTX SV900MD

This 19" monitor is an odd mix of good and bad. The image quality is generally pretty good, with nice even lighting, good lights and darks, and a sharp, stable picture. But this was the only monitor of the bunch that doesn't appear to have its own scaler, as the option to use the monitor's scaler was grayed out and we could only use the video card's, which is slightly inferior to most of those built into the monitors. The built-in speakers are placed far enough apart to produce decent stereo, but the sound quality is poor. Separate VGA and DVI ports are both available as well as a nice two-port USB port. There was minimal blurring in games, confirming the listed 25ms response time, but scrolling web pages with colored text and backgrounds created odd flickering artifacts at times. Overall quality is still pretty high and the price isn't bad for a 19" display.

RATING ★★★★½

PLANAR PL191M

In almost every way, shape, and form, this is the CTX SV900MD. The panel is exactly the same, with the same USB hub, VGA and DVI inputs, speakers, and controls. The on-screen display is identical. The performance is the same, both on paper and in real-world tests. The only real difference is its looks: while both CTX and Planar have models available in both white and black, the styling of Planar's case is slightly more appealing.

RATING ★★★★½

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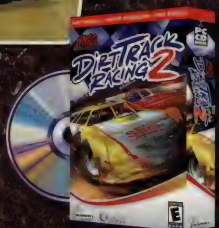

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LCDS EXPLAINED

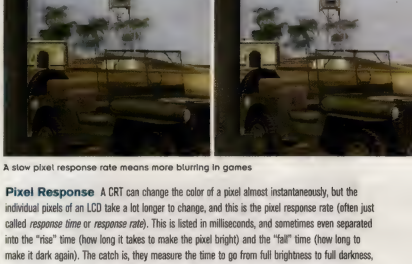
Everything you always wanted to know ...but were afraid to ask

Just when you though you have got a grip on monitor technology–dot pitch and all that–they go and change everything. LCDs are fundamentally different from standard tube monitors (CRTs) and are described by a different set of measurements. Here's the lowdown on what it all means and whether or not it's important.

Brightness Also called *luminance*, it's how much light a monitor puts out and is measured in candelas per square meter, abbreviated cd/m^2 and commonly called "nits." If your room is a dark cave, a low nits rating won't hurt you, but look for a high rating–at least 250–if the monitor is used in a well-lit area.

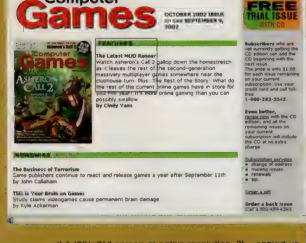
Contrast Ratio Described as some sort of "to one" ratio, like "three hundred to one" (300:1), it represents the difference in brightness between the brightest brights and the darkest darks. It's not important anymore, as all modern LCDs have perfectly good contrast and their anti-glare coatings make the differences mostly irrelevant.

Viewing Angle Another statistic you can ignore. In most cases, it's good enough not to make any difference unless you regularly crowd four people around your computer monitor. If that's the case, look for a horizontal viewing angle of at least 160°.



A slow pixel response rate means more blurring in games

Pixel Response A CRT can change the color of a pixel almost instantaneously, but the individual pixels of an LCD take a lot longer to change, and this is the pixel response rate (often just called *response time* or *response rate*). This is listed in milliseconds, and sometimes even separated into the "rise" time (how long it takes to make the pixel bright) and the "fall" time (how long to make it dark again). The catch is, they measure the time to go from full brightness to full darkness, which is actually *faster* than the time to go from partially bright to partially dark. So if a monitor says it has a pixel response time of 35ms, it takes 35 milliseconds to go from black to white and back again, but it would take even longer for it to go from, say, dark purple to lighter purple. This means that when something moves across the screen there's a little blurring trail as the pixels fade away in the previous location. The better the response rate, the less noticeable this smearing effect is. The best LCDs have a combined rise and fall time of about 25ms. There are 1000ms in a second, this means the pixels change about 40 times a second under ideal conditions. The very best desktop LCDs still create a bit of a smearing effect with games that you won't see on even the cheapest modern CRTs. This is biggest downside to gaming with an LCD so you'll want to get it as low as possible. Anything under 35ms will work fine for watching movies, but for games, go as low as you can afford. If you want to test pixel response rate on a monitor in a store, load up a web page with lots of colored text on a colored background, grab the title bar, and move it around the screen a bit. You'll get a good idea of the blurring you'll see in games. ●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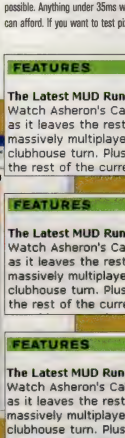

Resolution Unlike CRTs, LCD monitors have one resolution, referred to as its *native resolution*. If your monitor has a resolution of 1280x1024, then displaying your desktop or games at 1280x1024 look very sharp. If you run at 1024x768, the image will have to be scaled up to 1280x1024 to fill the screen, which makes things look blurry. Just how blurry is dependant on the quality of the *scaler* in the monitor or video card, but the higher the LCD panel's resolution, the smaller the pixels and therefore the less noticeable the blurring.

CATE ARCHER from "No One Lives Forever™ 2: A Spy in H.A.R.M.'s Way™" courtesy of Monolith Productions, Inc.

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SONY SDM-V72W

Sony's new widescreen entertainment monitor is something of a curiosity. A 17" monitor with input options galore (s-video, composite, YUV component, VGA, and audio) the big deal here is that it's a widescreen monitor with a resolution of 1280x768. That's the good news, but it's also the bad news. The resolution and YUV input make it ideal for HDTV input, and it's nice to watch DVDs or play widescreen-enabled games with it and the extra desktop space is nice, but at 17" it's a little small for "sit back" entertainment like movies. Worse, since most games don't support widescreen modes, using the 1024x768 display mode effectively gives you a 14.7" display. The paper specs list a response time slightly faster than anything else–22ms–but while the blurring was minimal, it wasn't noticeably better than most 25ms screens. The speakers are decent as built-in fare go, and the svelte remote and slick on-screen menus are nice touches. This is a monitor we really want to love, but the $1,000 price and limited size get in the way.

RATING ★★★½

TO LCD OR NOT TO LCD?

If we were to pick just one of the LCD monitors tested here to keep on our desks for the next few years, it would be the BenQ FP2081. The image quality and response time are just too good, and that huge 20" screen is to die for. But truth be told, we're pretty happy sticking with a good CRT for the time being. Sure they're bulky and the image isn't quite as sharp as a good LCD running at its native resolution, but even the world's best LCD creates a smearing effect in games due to the relatively slow response times.

In the near-term, there doesn't appear to be much effort involved in improving the LCD's shortcomings, as manufacturers instead focus on lowering prices. But further out, perhaps 18 months away, is a new technology called Organic LED, which should be cheaper to manufacture, are brighter, sharper, thinner, consume less power, and best of all, have response times up to a thousand times faster than most LCDs. Don't hold your breath waiting for them to arrive just yet, though. The first OLED devices will be cell phones and small handhelds, followed by a few laptops, and ultimately desktop displays, and it'll be at least a couple years before they're commonplace.

In the meantime, if you're in the market for a new monitor or buying a new computer with one, maybe a space and energy-saving LCD is the thing for you. You'll have to shop carefully to find one that won't impair your gaming, but the benefits might be worth the effort and extra cost. ●

THE SPECS

	Screen Size	Resolution	Brightness	Contrast	Pixel reponse	Horiz. viewing angle	Price
CTX SV900MD	19"	1280x1024	250 cd/m²	500:1	25ms	170°	$999
BenQ FP2081	20.1"	1600x1200	250 cd/m²	350:1	25ms	160°	$1840
Hercules ProphetView 920	17"	1280x1024	250 cd/m²	350:1	25ms	150°	$749
Philips Brilliance 180P2	18.1"	1280x1024	250 cd/m²	350:1	50ms	160°	$1099
Philips 150MT	15"	1024x768	310 cd/m²	500:1	25ms	140°	$899
Planar PL191M	19"	1280x1024	250 cd/m²	500:1	25ms	170°	$950
Sony SDM-V72W	17.1"	1280x768 (wide screen)	450 cd/m²	500:1	22ms	150°	$999

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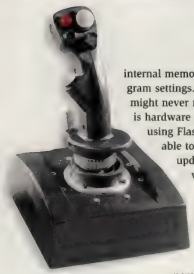

HOTAS Cougar

Did Thrustmaster chop this out of an F-16? This is heavy metal!

RATING ★★★★½

MANUFACTURER Thrustmaster (www.thrustmaster.com) MSRP $299.00

Computer Games EDITOR'S CHOICE

OK, so you might never actually find yourself in a real cockpit of an F-16 but the HOTAS Cougar from Thrustmaster is the very next best thing. Based on the plane's block 52 stick and throttle controller, this is no mere joystick. It has s a full metal casing of both the flight control stick and throttle and together these carry some real weight. There are 28 programmable buttons spread across the two units; multiple hat switches and even an 18-pound spring for solid resistance.

None of this would mean much if it didn't delivered the goods when you're taking to the virtual skies but the HOTAS Cougar is one impressive bad boy of a stick and it doesn't get much better. With its Foxy programming software and numerous pre-sets for key flight simulations, it's like a workhorse for most modern day flight simulations. The downside is that it's overkill for period games set during World War I, World War II or Korea almost to the point of being utterly anarchistic with its button layout.

However, for those current-day jetsetters this could be the last word in controllers. Setup and connection to Windows XP is truly simple, certainly easier than passing airport screeners these days. It uses a full speed USB connection and features 16K of internal memory to access program settings. And while you might never notice it, this stick is hardware upgradeable using Flash so you'll be able to receive any updates on the software as well as hardware side. At $299 the HOTAS Cougar isn't cheap, especially when compared to most flight controllers and all-purpose joysticks, but it is like a dream device for the hardcore and faithful. It doesn't come with pedals but it is compatible with standard analog input devices. Considering its weight and size this is probably best used by serious flight simulation gurus because this is not something you'll want to take out and put away a lot, unless you think you need to hit the weights a bit. —*Peter Suciu*

TrackIR GX

It might be time to look around for a different controller

RATING ★★½☆☆

MANUFACTURER Eye Control Technologies, Inc. (www.eyecontrol.com) MSRP $129.00

One thing that has been missing from first-person shooters and even flight simulations is that sense of fast movement that kind of disrupts your field of view. Games don't simulate it well because even if you make a quick jerk on the mouse the experience is more like a quick move of a camera than a turn of your head. Now there is a game controller that actually comes close to recreating the natural movement of your head – but so far the results don't impress.

Eye Control Technologies, Inc. has introduced a gaming controller meant to replace the mouse by using a camera to track the movement of your head. The trackIR GX was originally developed as device for people with physical disabilities and the company believes it could be a viable mouse alternative. The results vary so significantly that the final judgment is still out, but from initial trials with first-person shooters and flight simulations—the intended target genres—this game controller simply lacks control.

The biggest problem is that this camera device must sit on top of your monitor while you wear some sort of simple sensor, which is little more than a stick-on dot. If you're not one to wear glasses or a cap then you're stuck with a dot on your forehead. The tracking for simple tasks like navigating the Windows desktop is reasonable but it only moves the cursor and leaves the clicking to other hotkeys. There are an additional 17 possible head positions to replicate these keys as well but that essentially requires learning a new skill to use properly.

In games, especially first-person shooters, you are meant to keep your head perfectly still until you choose to make a movement. Nod or shake your head in reaction to something on the screen and your onscreen view suddenly changes. Far too often in games like *Day of Defeat* and *Medal of Honor*, you have to nod up or down to re-center your view. The results are better with flight simulations but mostly because a mouse is pretty much a secondary controller, taking a backseat to the joystick and pedals.

The trackIR seems like an ideal way of allowing gamers who have lost the use of their arm(s) to play, but overall this is not a controller that will give you a gaming edge if you have mastered a mouse and keyboard combination. —*PS*

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This is definitely a game with character(s). The Lithtech engine's superb facial animation brings the cut scenes to vivid life.

No One Lives Forever 2: A Spy in H.A.R.M.'s Way

Nobody does it better: Monolith is at the top of the gaming world with this superb sequel

by Steve Bauman

GENRE Spy Action
DEVELOPER Monolith [www.lith.com] PUBLISHER Fox Interactive/Sierra [www.foxinteractive.com/ www.sierra.com]
REQUIREMENTS Pentium III 500, 128MB RAM MULTIPLAYER 2-4 players; Internet, LAN ESRB Mature

Computer Games EDITOR'S CHOICE

When you've built a franchise around a single dominant element, sequels present a unique challenge. If you're *Men in Black II*, you lose the coolness of discovering the unexpected ways aliens integrate with normal society, leaving you with nothing to do but revisit the same places with decidedly mixed results. If you're the next Austin Powers movie, you've exhausted all the time-traveling culture clash kitsch possible so you toss in more urine, poop, fart, and sexual references than a John Waters movie. If you're *No One Lives Forever 2: A Spy in H.A.R.M.'s Way*, with its groovy 60s spy setting and strong female lead, you slow down and deepen the gameplay of the original while retaining and expanding the elements people loved. In other words, you make an already superb game even better.

This isn't too much of a surprise. Unlike movies, games sequels are almost always superior, if only technologically, to their predecessors. Besides, developer Monolith is on a roll, with the original *No One Lives Forever*, *Aliens Versus Predator 2*, plus the upcoming *Tron 2.0* and *Matrix* online game. *A Spy in H.A.R.M.'s Way* takes the original's setting and polishes the hell out of everything. The gameplay, a mixture of pure gun-toting action and cool, stealthy spying, is refined to near-perfection, with a simple skill system that gives you obvious, tangible feedback that you're becoming a better spy. It's full of cool gadgets, clever humor, and superb pacing that makes it feel like a comedic role-playing/adventure/action hybrid, a sort of *Deus Powers*. The single-player game offers the kinds of memorable moments the original is famous for, and there's also a simple co-operative multiplayer game for up to four players that lets your take on subsets of the single-player missions. It's entertaining the first few times but loses steam quickly; however, it in no way diminishes the impact of what is a superb overall game.

Cate Archer, super spy

Once again, you take control of the British super spy Cate Archer, now voiced superbly by Jen Taylor instead of Kit Harris, as she battles the nefarious H.A.R.M. and tries to uncover the meaning behind something called "Project Omega." Though you're no closer to finding out just what H.A.R.M. actually stands for (you can uncover its mission statement and marketing problems), you do face off against some familiar and not-so familiar foes: Dmitri Volkov, Magnus Armstrong, a new director of H.A.R.M. with a serious mother complex, and Isako the ninja. After facing off against entire levels full of mimes, particularly ones that speak in outrageous French accents and tend to run away like they're riding a pony, it's hard to imagine why we've been deprived of killing them for so many years.

As Cate tries to diffuse a taut situation between the Russians and the US, she finds herself traveling to exotic places, meeting interesting people, and generally killing them in all sorts of sneaky ways. There are levels set in Japan, India, Siberia, and H.A.R.M.'s needlessly complex undersea and underground lairs (in the latter, you'll finally uncover the why and how of lava). In a slightly windy Akron, Ohio, you get to search through Tom Goodman's bachelor pad, giving you tons of insight into his character (just check out the door to his "secret" spy area).

Extraordinary ★★★★★ Excellent ★★★★½
Maybe ★★★½ Mediocre ★★½ Contemptible ★½

[top] Your mascara can come in handy in a tight pinch. >>> [bottom] If you can't kill 'em, crack 'em up! The level in India lets you really use some of Cate's weirder arsenal.

Spying for fun

Along the way, you uncover bits and pieces of the story from various H.A.R.M. internal memos (they need a better document destruction policy) and the overheard conversations of the various talkative guards and henchmen. But mostly you watch a lot of superbly produced cut scenes. In the original game, as clever and well-written as they were, these tended to be interminably long. For *A Spy in H.A.R.M.'s Way*, they've been tightened and shortened, so much so in fact that it's hard not to wish they were a little longer. They range from funny to downright surreal, such as the scene that plays out in the "Endgame." It involves game shows and square people… you really need to see it to believe it.

If the plot and settings don't quite reach the zippy highs of the original, it's certainly not the fault of the game but a case of our own raised expectations. It's all pretty damn amusing, if not downright funny, with marketing weasels everywhere taking a lion's share of hits. With almost every other action game being full of macho blustering and dark colors supposedly making them all intense and scary, it's practically radical for this game to be bright and shiny and, well, sometimes girly.

REVIEWS IN REVIEW

Paranoia and Spying in the House of Games

Deus Ex
RATING ★★★★½
Our Word "When it's all done, you might even find yourself playing again, just to build a different J.C. Denton and tackle things differently."

In Cold Blood
RATING ★★★★
Our Word "Its mix of classic adventure-style gameplay, intriguing storyline, logical puzzles and just a touch of action make it a topnotch choice for fans of thought-inducing gameplay."

Majestic
RATING ★★
Our Word "… most of the game is earnest, limp, and slow. The truth is out there, but in this case, it's not really worth finding."

The Messenger
RATING ★★★
Our Word "… it is aimed at the adventure purist who is willing to scan and shuffle without complaint… waging intellectual war against the forces of evil."

Metal Gear Solid
RATING ★★★
Our Word "[It] may have been one of the first games to blaze the 'stealthy action' trail, but more recent PC offerings have done it better, which leaves this port showing its age."

No One Lives Forever
RATING ★★★★★
Our Word "It's the absolute antithesis of every hackneyed blast-a-thon… no other shooter has come as close to living up to our raised expectations for the genre."

Sanity: Aiken's Artifact
RATING ★★★
Our Word "If you are entertained by style alone, this game may be right up your alley. If you also want truly challenging puzzles and combat that rewards creativity, you may be a bit disappointed."

Spycraft: The Great Game
RATING ★★★★
Our Word: "[It's] like nothing else you have ever tried. . . if you're not already paranoid, [it] will guarantee sleepless nights."

Traitors Gate
RATING ★★★
Our Word "There's a lot to like in the way the world is built with everything inter-connecting, and the tools you must make use of in order to proceed. . . but there are too many flaws that detract from the fun."

The spy they love

The camera, and the 3D artists, love Cate Archer. She has better hair than any other character in gaming, and her outfits are incredibly posh. She's fun and sexy because she feels like a truly three-dimensional character rather than a caricature. The attention lavished on her in cutscenes is astounding. She comes alive, as do all of the other characters, because the Lithtech engine allows a full range of facial expressions. The sheer number of animations, eye-rollings, and gestures makes it appear that Cate Archer isn't just a 3D character animation, but an actor giving a performance.

The environments are equally impressive. When discussing graphics, people get hung up on polygon counts and texture resolution, focusing on the mechanical method of creating the look while essentially ignoring its most important element, the overall art direction. Even if the graphic engine wasn't up to par in the game—and the "Jupiter" version of Lithtech is phenomenal, better looking and faster than its predecessors—it would still be a beautiful game. It's full of amazing little details—stop and laugh at some of the bizarre signage and strange objects—and its adherence to that bizarre 60s aesthetic makes the graphics of the supposedly more technically sophisticated but grotesquely cartoonish *Unreal Tournament 2003* look like the notebook scribblings of fantasy/sci-fi novel art-obsessed 15-year olds.

The audio is equally distinctive. Unlike the warmed-over metal or industrial retreads seen in every other action game, the soundtrack is full of appropriate ethnic motifs for each environment, though played with appropriate 60s instrumentation. It's more Esquivel! than Reznor—instead of grinding guitars or pounding synthesizers, you get a lovely Theremin in the underwater lair, some extremely cool Indian and Japanese motifs, and something disturbingly reminiscent of the theme from *Elevator Action* in Siberia.

Spy games

All the presentation in the world doesn't compensate for weak gameplay, but once again Monolith hits the target. It makes perfect sense for a spy game to emphasize stealth, and if the original was too unforgiving and lacked some of the basic tools of stealth, like leaning around corners, *A Spy in H.A.R.M.'s Way* pulls off the trick of making it equally satisfying to either blast or sneak your way through each level. You're rewarded more with the latter approach, as it allows you to soak in more of the guard dialogues that add so much flavor to the game.

Creeping around also gives you more chances to observe the excellent AI. In some ways, it's actually dumber; for playability reasons, it tends to investigate various noises with less urgency or certainty and has a very short memory, often giving up the chase (or in the case of the Indian officers, keeling over to catch their breath because they're out of shape). You can knock over bottles and make noise—unintentionally or not—and they'll immediately investigate, but just as quickly break off the search. You can unscrew lights to darken rooms and keep the AI from turning the light back on and discovering you. Unlike the first game, all alarms are localized, keeping your occasional slip-ups from becoming large-scale problems. It's the first 3D game since *Thief II* to make stealth entertaining, and it's considerably more forgiving than Looking Glass' game, because in a pinch, you can always just blast your way out of a level.

Monolith also improves on the exploration-aspect (i.e. "adventuring") of the genre by rewarding you for discovering bonus objects and completing secondary objectives. You can spend the points you accumulate for completing tasks and finding objects on improving various attributes, like stealth, searching, carrying, etc. While the first game had a similar system, it was hidden well enough that that no one noticed or cared about it. Every skill improvement is now obvious and drastic, proving even more motivation and reward for improving Cate and exploring the environments. The tweaks let you tailor the game more to your style of play.

Armed with her mighty banana, Cate Archer takes on evil in all of its forms.

The superb interface features minor changes that strip away the tedious parts of your typical 3D action game. There are simple little things, such as the "Action" button automatically reloading your weapon when it's not engaged in some action, and more complex ones, such as automatically switching to the best tools for a given job. Monolith alone seems to realize that it's a lot more fun to decode messages and pick locks than to constantly switch between your weapon and your decoder or lockpick. When you do change weapons and/or tools, you get to experience what have to be the best putting-things-away and taking-things-out animations ever.

The spy we love

It's little details like an inconsequential animation that make this such a special game. And when you compare the output of all of the companies producing 3D shooters nowadays, a game as vibrant and alive as *A Spy in H.A.R.M.'s Way* exposes how creatively bankrupt the others are. They all produce safe, attractive, and competent shooters, but their games are completely predictable. Their macho bluster keeps them from giving off any sense that they're slightly unhinged—it's impossible to imagine anything as surreal as the "Man Handler" scene appearing in anyone else's shooter. Too many developers equate dark and dreary with serious and tension-filled. There's more tension and action sneaking around one level of Cate Archer's candy-colored world than there is in the entire *Solider of Fortune* series or in something like *Max Payne*.

No one does this kind of game better than Monolith at this point, and no game released thus far this year is as good as *No One Lives Forever 2*.

UPSIDE	Improves on the original in every way imaginable, beautiful looking, superb production values throughout, seriously fun in a very non-serious way
DOWNSIDE	Ends too soon, multiplayer sounds better on paper, sound and crash problems on some machines
RATING	★★★★★

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EVERYONE E Violence

CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Unreal Tournament 2003

The day the magic died... but at least it died a beautiful death

by Tom Chick

GENRE First-person WWE Shooter DEVELOPER Digital Extremes/Epic Games [www.digitalextremes.com/www.epicgames.com] PUBLISHER Infogrames [www.infogrames.com REQUIREMENTS Pentium III 733, 128MB RAM MULTIPLAYER 2-32 players; Internet, LAN ESRB Mature

Dude. Die, bitch! Ownage! *Unreal Tournament 2003* rocks. It **rawks**! Don't forget to **turn the safety off!** To read this review, you have to say everything in **bold face** as if you were announcing a **monster truck rally** on Tuesday night. **Tuesday, Tuesday, Tuesday!** Now try it again: *Unreal Tournament 2003* **really rocks!** Dude, that's better.

It's righteous. It's absolutely **bad ass.** After you capture the flag, you can press a key to **smack your own ass.** How **wicked sick** is that? **Monster kill!** When you're doing really good, *Unreal Tournament 2003* even says **"holy shit!"** Out loud! It cusses, something they don't do so much since *Kingpin*. ***Kingpin*!** Dude, don't let your **Mom hear.**

This faux-pro-wrestling over-the-top piercing shrillmanship stuff is **all up in your face.** You can't even pick your character model without the announcer bellowing its name. **Cannonball! Subversa! Widowmaker! Brutalis!** Badass **gladiators,** all! When was the last time a game's shell screen had you reaching for the volume button? **Hat trick! Thirty Seconds! Multi Kill! Holy shit!**

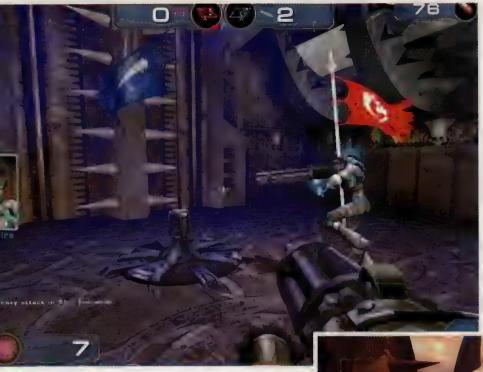
[left] These levels rock, for serious! [above left] These guys are righteous bad-asses! [above right] Dude, check it out, wicked sick!

Talking smack

It's exhausting, embarrassing, exasperating, and maybe even irrelevant. But it highlights that even as games get more advanced, they can be as juvenile as ever. *Unreal Tournament 2003* will not stop reminding you that it's as cool as stuff like Vin Diesel, the WWE, and Limp Bizkit, which you can take to mean whatever it means to you. This would be a non-issue if the game weren't so slathered in this overbearing sensibility.

It's not just the high school smack talk. It's the gratuitous bone-crunching sound effects, like snapping stalks of celery, as a body is blown backwards. It's the limb-jangling rag doll physics wracking a corpse as it plummets down a pit and bangs off the bars of a series of grates placed for no reason other than to show off the rag doll physics. It's the blood spraying, the de-limbed torsos, and the headless corpses with flames where their heads were before they got sniped clean off. It's the supremacy of twitch action, the ultra-fast default game speed, the new double jumping, the new wall bouncing, and the new adrenaline combo power-up boosters like *tap-tap*-taptap, tap-tap-tap-*tap*, or *tap*-tap-taptap. It's the tutorial explaining that "it is in your best interest to hop as much as possible" and the jump boots being replaced with shimmering jump pads built into the level design. It's no thigh pads and no shield belts, but big fat obvious glowing orange shield icons spinning around. It's the weapons tuned and balanced so thoroughly that victory can only be decided by the raw skill and reflexes that shut out newbies, who will get their asses kicked until they learn to like it, get better, or quit playing like a bunch of panty waist bitches who can go offline, turn down the speed, switch off dodging and adrenaline, and dial down the bots a notch or two if they want, but stay the hell off the servers unless they wanna be lunch meat for your clan.

Here is first-person hyperaction, an unsophisticated and complex groove of killing and being killed as



(above) This guy is about to smack his own ass, no joke!

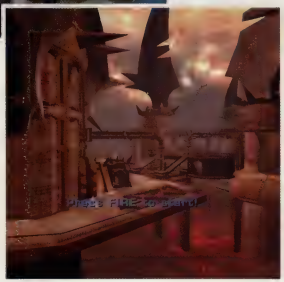
pumped up as a power mad thirteen-year-old on a sugar jag. As other shooters grow up and grapple with words like realism and storyline and pretensions like *mise en scène* and sly humor, here we have an unrepentant throwback to the simple need for speed. It's been out of fashion for a while, but it's back like the reincarnation of id's *Quake III*. This is the second time the developers at Epic have trumped their counterparts at id. The first time was back in 1999 when both *Quake III* and *Unreal Tournament* were released. *Unreal Tournament* was the far superior product on so many levels: aesthetics, variety, depth, accessibility, innovation, flexibility, and whatever people meant by broad terms like "gameplay" and "fun". *Quake III* was a soulless technical marvel that played really fast. Now Epic is trumping *Quake III* again with *Unreal Tournament 2003*, its own soulless technical marvel that plays really fast.

But it's pretty

There's no denying that it's a state-of-the-art technical marvel without parallel. You'll need serious hardware, since it eats CPU cycles and video memory for breakfast and then comes back for seconds while other games are still sipping their first cup of coffee. There are curved surfaces and intricate detailing for no reason other than to make you stop and say 'look at all those curved surfaces and all that intricate detailing'. Are polygons so commonplace now? Is lighting really that cheap? Does a ceiling fan really need to cast a lazy spinning shadow on the floor?

These graphics do manage to breathe new life into conventions like lava, castles, and snow (although it seems that no amount of Epic's lavish detail can revive the stale look of hi-tech industrial grunge). Like *Wing Commanders* and *Quakes* of old, this is an upgrade-your-hardware game that'll wring every penny's worth of splendor from a $300 graphics card.

But *Unreal Tournament 2003* is soulless because it's missing so much of that sense of discovery that made *Unreal Tournament* great. You won't find anything quite like the thrill Epic delivered three years ago, when you first played assault mode running the length of a speeding train or swimming down to an undersea base, when you figured out the shock rifle combo or flew your first redeemer, when you played with the virtually unlimited combos afforded by all those mutators, and traded shots with Steve Polge's convincingly fallible bot AI.



Not that *Unreal Tournament 2003* doesn't try. The AI is still first rate, so a tip of the hat to Mr. Polge. But the new game modes consists mainly of a) everyone rushing after one person or b) everyone splitting into two groups. There are no trains or galleons and in the undersea base, the undersea part is just window dressing with alien shark models swimming around out there while you're dry inside. The shock rifle combo is a feature instead of a secret and the new Ion Painter elicits a shrug more than anything else. The mutators read like a perfunctory list of options: low grav, big head models, instagib, been there, done that, got all the T-shirts three years ago. It all feels like a pod people version of *Unreal Tournament*. It's not that the magic is gone. It's just not magic anymore.

UPSIDE	It's wicked sick Ownage of the speed freak first-person shooter action genre!
DOWNSIDE	And it won't stop reminding you
RATING	★★★☆☆

Battlefield 1942

The new king of the multiplayer (only) shooters

by Benjamin E. Sones

GENRE Online Shooter DEVELOPER Digital Illusions [www.dice.se] PUBLISHER Electronic Arts [www.ea.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium III 500, 128 MB RAM, 32 MB Video Card MULTIPLAYER 2-64 Players; Internet, LAN ESRB Teen

Sometimes great games take you by surprise. Such is the case with *Battlefield 1942*, a game created by Digital Illusions, a little known developer of racing sims and pinball games. Remember *Motorhead*? *Pinball Dreams*? *Barbie Groovy Games*? Don't worry, no one else does either. [Console fans may remember *Rallisport Challenge* for Xbox, though. —ed] You can bet dollars to donuts that everyone will be talking about *Battlefield 1942* for years to come, because it is easily one of the best action games this year, and possibly the best online team-based game ever. Go figure.

If you played the wildly popular Wake Island demo that circulated before the game's release, you're probably nodding your head. Of course, if you played the Wake Island multiplayer demo, then you probably already bought the game, too. As a sales pitch, it was awfully convincing. The full game is even better, but it shares one thing with the demo: it is essentially a multiplayer-only experience. Not only that, it's one best experienced through the low-ping luxury of a broadband connection. The documentation recommends modem users stick to 16 player games, and that's too few players by half for many of the maps. Of course, you can always play off-line... or not. The game box says nothing at all about the solo campaign, and that is probably just as well. It is terrible. Put it out of your mind.

If you fall into the "online shooter fan with broadband" category, make no mistake this is one of the best games of the year, a perfect balance of fun and realism, and simple mechanics with complex permutations. The World War II setting provides a familiar backdrop with immediately recognizable enemies, battles, and goals. You may have heard of the long-time PC gaming pipe dream called the "virtual battlefield." Here it is.

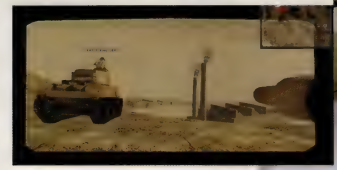
Did you see that?

Perhaps the most endearing feature in the game is this: neat stuff happens. It's not the carefully storyboarded, choreographed, and scripted neat stuff that is the hallmark of post-*Half-Life* shooters; it's the type that comes from carefully constructing an environment filled with tangible goals and assorted instruments of destruction and then setting a bunch of completely unchoreographed players loose in it. Carefully scripted neat stuff can be visceral and engaging, but it is a hollow sort of thrill that comes from having exactly the same experience as every other player. Remember storming Omaha Beach in *Medal of Honor*? So does every other player that picked up the game. They probably remember it exactly as you do.

The neat stuff that happens in *Battlefield 1942* is even more entertaining for its spontaneity. The game sets the stage but the players create the drama. Imagine running through the hedgerows of the Normandy countryside. You hear the sounds of several battles raging in the distance, and an M7 Priest is shelling tanks from the relative safety of a nearby roadside ditch. You see a German Engineer mining the bridge to Carentan, and so you drop to one knee and take him down, rush to the bridge, and pick up the mines that he dropped. You hear a low roar, and a group of players swoop overhead in a B-17 bomber, heading North on a bombing run. Two German fighters are dogging it, and the sky erupts in puffs of flak as another player opens fire with an AA battery. One of the fighters

goes down in a ball of flames, hitting the ground 40 feet away. You have a fraction of a second to realize that the wreckage is rolling towards you, and another to get out of the way. So you dive over the side of the bridge just as the fighter rolls across the spot where you were standing in a cloud of dust and debris, setting off the mines in a spectacular explosion that kills you before you have a chance to fall 50 feet to the river below.

That sort of thing happens in the game. All the time.



[clockwise from right] Sniping roosts are handy... just remember to check your back every now and again. >>> Submarine pilot: the ultimate camper. >>> A tank column prepares to bombard a German factory in the Battle of Gazala.

The spice of life

The game matches this incredible variety of events with an equally incredible variety of content. If you get tired of hedgerows in Normandy, you can take the helm of a Fletcher-class Destroyer in the waters off Midway Island. Or battle tanks and snipers in a brutal street battle amidst the ruins of Stalingrad. Or lead a tank column through the maze of canyons at Gazala. Or face down deadly Tiger tanks in the frozen countryside at the Battle of the Bulge. There is a little something for all manner of tastes, and if you get tired of one map you can move on to another.

You can also try out any of the five different "kits" (Assault, Medic, Anti-Tank, Engineer, and Scout), each of which is useful to differing degrees and in different ways on each map. If you cut your chops playing an Assault grunt in the streets of Berlin, you will find that being an Engineer in Tobruk is like playing an entirely different game, and that is a good thing.

With so many kits, maps, and vehicles, you might think that the game would be a bit... overwhelming. It's not; in fact, it does a superlative job at balancing accuracy and entertainment. It's exactly as realistic as it needs to be, and not one whit more. The vehicles are easy to operate, with simple and consistent controls. Foot combat employs some interesting but logical twists, such as weapon fire that is more accurate when you are crouching or prone.

Tying it together is the best conceived set of goals since *Counter-strike*. The highlight is "Conquest," in which each team starts with a number of "tickets" that represent the number of reinforcements that it can muster before it loses the battle. You deplete your enemies' tickets by killing their soldiers or by holding objectives, sort of like a Domination mode in *Unreal Tournament*, but the objectives have intrinsic value as well. Some function as spawn points. Some contain caches of ammo, or medical lockers, or vehicles. Some are strategic chokepoints. You do not seize objectives merely to fulfill an abstract requirement for victory. You seize them because they are useful. The weak, Gamespy-powered server browser is the only real chink in the game's online armor.

About that solo game...

"Now really," you may be saying to yourself, "if the multiplayer game is so wonderful, the solo game can't be *that* bad, right?" Yes, it can. And it is. Honest. No, it does not make for an interesting diversion. No, you cannot use it for practice, even if you have a machine powerful enough to run it with more than a handful of bots, which you almost certainly do not. All you are missing is some of the dumbest AI in shooter history playing on exactly the same maps that you could be playing online. Just pretend that the solo portion of the game does not exist. It's better that way.

When you get right down to it, *Battlefield 1942* doesn't need a solo campaign. If Digital Illusions had decided to leave it out altogether, this would still be a fantastic game. If you have the bandwidth to run it, buy this game. If you do not have enough bandwidth to run it, get more bandwidth. Then buy this game.

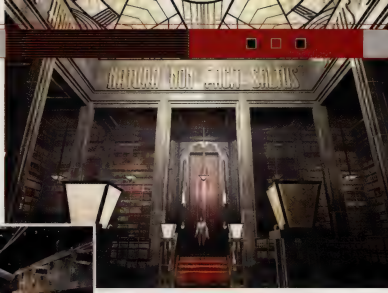
UPSIDE	The best multiplayer shooter since multiplayer shooters
DOWNSIDE	Don't even ask about the solo game
RATING	★★★★½

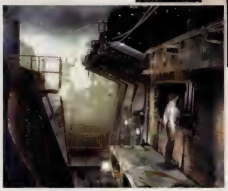
Syberia

Let's go adventure gaming, let's go!

by Matthew Peckham

GENRE Adventure
DEVELOPER Microids [www.microids.com]
PUBLISHER The Adventure Company [www.adventurecompanygames.com]
REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 350, 64 MB RAM, 3D accelerator
MULTIPLAYER None
ESRB Teen





[top right] Inside the great library of Barrockstadt. >>> [above] The smoky city of Komkolzgrad, a veritable Stalinist paradise.

Computer Games EDITOR'S CHOICE

Writers keeps trumpeting the demise of <insert genre> gaming every couple years. It's like the industry has a two-year sliding memory bank. Fortunately, developers like Microids keep popping up to prove the fair-weather pundits wrong with games like *Syberia*. Old-school fans of adventure games pay attention: this is what you've been waiting for since *The Longest Journey*.

The game opens in a rustic European village somewhere in the French Alps. It is raining. A wind-up drummer stutters along, frowning, leading a bizarre funeral procession up a cobblestone street. In the background, a lone violin plays a mournful dirge. A horse-drawn carriage passes, piloted by a hunching, silvery figure. Mechanical men in ties and trench coats follow, taking lurching steps, not quite in lockstep, sporting top hats and umbrellas. From the get-go, you know things are not going to play out on the straight and narrow.

You assume the role of perky Kate Walker, an attorney for the New York law firm Marson and Lormont Associates. Your firm has sent you to Valadilène—an alpine village in France, home of the Voralberg Toy Company and the "world capital of mechanical toys and automatons"—to close a major business deal. Voralberg toys have been around since the 13th century, but over the past decade or so have fallen out of demand due to the rise of electronic forms of entertainment (like, ha ha, video games). Now a multinational company wants to buy Voralberg Manufacturing. But when you arrive, the last heir and owner has died. A little investigating turns up information that points to another possible heir to the factory, and thus begins your real quest: to hunt down this enigmatic figure by following a series of clues that will lead across Europe and eventually to the remotest regions of Asia.

The developers have pointed out that puzzles in the game would buck the tradition of *Myst*-style abstractness, where playing the right tune on a keyboard might open a doorway but leave you wondering what the hell the keyboard was doing there in the first place. To their credit, this is mostly the case, and it really lends to the sense of accomplishment as you work your way steadily between the game's four primary locations. Rarely are you left wondering what to do next, keeping you from abandoning the game for a week or a month (or forever) because of some silly checkerboard brain teaser. The game adds a cell phone to Kate's inventory, which is necessary to solve certain puzzles while at the same time providing for occasional interruptions by friends and relatives that help flesh out Kate's *raison d'etre*.

The downside of super-integrated puzzles is that you will also tend to solve them perhaps a bit too quickly, propelling yourself through the plot at a breakneck pace and reaching the satisfying conclusion all too quickly. In fact, what gives the game legs is also another one of its problems—Kate's on-screen motion. She's quite the slowpoke. It's not a big deal at first, but you find that getting her from point-to-point is a chore, especially given the intricacy of some of the environs, but these are minor quibbles.

Visually, the screen is filled with images of haunting originality. Corroded metal landscapes bleed into lush organic terrariums; delightfully idiosyncratic characters greet you at all points on your journey; creaky "tik-tok" automatons shuffle along brick streets, perch over doorways, and tip their Fred Astaire hats at you with surreal politeness. It's like Frank L. Baum and Fritz Lang fell into a mixing bowl somewhere and this is what rolled off the baking rack. The music is solemn yet inspired, in the tradition of the best adventure games, blending almost perfectly with the mood of a scene or the flavor of a moment.

Syberia is a boon for adventure gaming. While it doesn't necessarily propel the genre forward, it does capstone all the elements that make the genre great, as well as provide plenty of reasons to sustain it. Adventure fans or anyone partial to rare storytelling, don't miss this one.

UPSIDE	Brilliant, original visuals, riveting story, and voice acting that doesn't suck
DOWNSIDE	Ends too soon, Kate tends to amble around like Grandma at the grocery store
RATING	★★★★½

"...A PRIME CONTENDER FOR ACTION TITLE OF THE YEAR." – *GAMERSCLICK*

"A SOLID ENTRY INTO THE MARKET WITH AN INTERESTING STORY AND PLENTY OF ATTENTION TO DETAIL." – *IGN*

"A VISUAL FEAST, MAKING THE MOST OUT OF GRITTY TEXTURES AND INTRICATE INDOOR ENVIRONMENTS." – *PC GAMER*

"...ONE OF THE MORE INTERESTING SHOOTERS OF THE FALL SEASON." – *GAMESPY*

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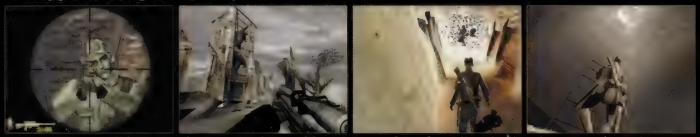
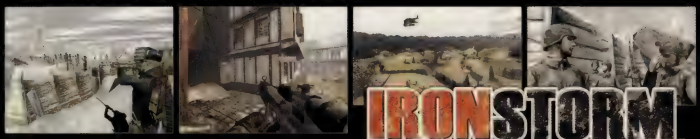


Iron Storm will have you battling in the muddy trenches of the front line, infiltrating an enemy science complex, sweeping out sniper nests, battling onboard an enemy infested armored train, and more. The fate of entire nations now rests solely in your hands.



IRONSTORM

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MATURE M BLOOD AND GORE VIOLENCE ESRB

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Medieval: Total War

A game of thrones: Shogun's heir has matured

by Kelly Wand

I've heard of uphill battles but this is ridiculous. Clashing armies too often meld into a twitching mishmash of colors, bouncing flags, and indiscriminate screaming.

GENRE Historical Strategy DEVELOPER The Creative Assembly [www.totalwar.com] PUBLISHER Activision [www.activision.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 350, 128MB RAM MULTIPLAYER 2-8 Players; Internet, LAN ESRB Teen

Medieval: Total War is an entertaining, thoroughly Anglicized follow-up to 2000's well-regarded austere bloodbath *Shogun: Total War*. Though markedly more soaked in period detail and enhancements big and small, it's good for all the same reasons as the original. What gives *Medieval* its zing is how its paired modes of turn-based empire building and realistically chaotic battle screens complement each other as well as Lance Bass and an airless vacuum probably would have in a more idealistic universe.

The designers have upped the ante by adding over a hundred new classes of units; the number of separate gunpowder-using troops alone would nicely satisfy the barracks of many another real-time strategy game. Also heartily welcome is the integration of castle siege warfare, complete with trebuchets and catapults necessary for the demolition of gatehouses and arrow towers that otherwise tear your men-at-arms to ribbons. Few games have ever delivered the tactics-over-glitz satisfaction of decimating vastly superior forces using terrain, morale, and careful positioning of combined arms the way *Medieval* does; patience and intelligence prevail over numbers every time here, and that's solid design.

Graphically, though, despite big gains made since *Shogun*, the detail on the individual units is scant to none and the movement animations are herky-jerky at best, regardless of your resolution or what's under your hood. Things only get worse the larger the forces involved. Clashing armies simply meld into a twitching mishmash of colors, bouncing flags, and indiscriminate screaming, especially on Gamespy's Internet multiplayer, where it's safe to say that the kinks just haven't been worked out. Mid-game crashes are common, which is even more frustrating considering how long it takes just to set one up (up to eight players handpicking and upgrading sixteen armies with the assigned florins available takes a while).

The game comes with only three stand-alone historical battles, all involving England, and two are merely riffs on *Braveheart*. But the number of historical campaigns, some of which require unlocking, compensates big-time. They feature scenarios of Saladin, the 100 Years' War told from both perspectives, the Mongolian Golden Hordes, and a bunch more. No commemoration, oddly, of the 1453 battle at Constantinople that marks the deadline for the single-player campaign, but the map editor makes filling such blanks a matter of moments.

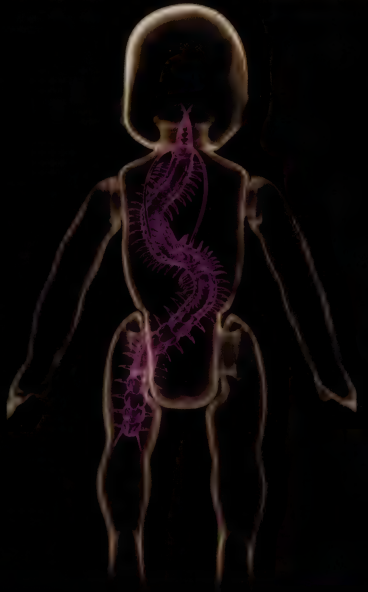
The single player campaign is *Medieval* at its most engrossing. As in *Shogun*, you administrate the expansion and infrastructure of an empire chosen from among twelve factions such as the Danes or the Arabian Almohads, all across what looks like a giant boardgame map of medieval Europe resting on a weatherbeaten oaken table that evokes nostalgic memories of old-school wargames like *Kingmaker* and *Diplomacy*. With the occasional battle providing background chorus, the bulk of your time is spent building watch towers, assassins, bishops et al., and sending them out to harangue or charm your AI opponent factions.

The fun is in the wealth of near pointless but fascinating details, and in the vagaries of fate. It's possible, for example, to have nothing going on but six princesses scouring the Siberian steppes for possible suitors to forge a strategic alliance. Religion also plays a larger but subtler role this time. *Shogun* featured two religious factions, the Buddhists and the Christians, each of which allowed recruitment of a different type of warrior unit (the Buddhist monks were semi-magical). Here there are five religious factions, and their effects are purely political. The Papacy, for example, can excommunicate a Catholic faction, making them fair game for "crusades," a legal excuse to march troops through neutral lands and take them out militarily to acquire their lands and wealth. The Islamic version is a jihad, which can only be taken advantage of to reclaim invaded territories. Upgrading your province's church to a cathedral allows you to build Inquisitors, which can be used to put enemy generals on trial for heresy and burned. Fleets create trade routes and blockades and even fight. The victory conditions include a "Glorious Achievements" option, the specifics (and difficulty) of which vary from faction to faction.

With its rich in atmosphere and wealth of strategic options, *Medieval* is compelling for long hours into the night in the way of all games we'll think back on smiling in our old age. The more you play it, the more you find.

UPSIDE	Lots of fun, rich in atmosphere and strategic options, capability for battles involving more than ten thousand troops
DOWNSIDE	Each of those troops adds ten bucks to the hardware requirements, post-WarCraft III movement animations already look dated, spotty online stability
RATING	★★★★½

It's what's inside that counts.



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Mafia

Grand Theft Edsel, capiche?

by Douglas L. Erickson

GENRE Angry Taxi Simulation
DEVELOPER Illusion Softworks [www.illusionsoftworks.com] PUBLISHER Take 2 [www.take2games.com]
REQUIREMENTS Pentium III 700, 128MB RAM, 32MB 3D Accelerator
MULTIPLAYER None ESRB Mature

Where are the Keystone Kops when you need 'em? >>> [Insert] Is it Valentine's Day already?

There's little doubt that *Grand Theft Auto III* would become the template for many games to follow, but it comes a pleasant surprise when one of the first "urban sprawl" crimeland sims—*Mafia* from Czech developers Illusion Softworks—not only manages to be a solid genre entry, but also quite distinct in its own right. As an overall experience, it pulls the would-be legitimate businessman in like few other games have ever accomplished. Well-voiced cinemas, great camerawork, and solid dialogue envelop the player in a world of classic New York (called "Lost Heaven" here) gangland pulp, and the tight mission scripting makes sure that the extremely linear story plays out minus the hitches that plague more open-ended games of this variety.

The game's strongest suit is the main story mode, which places you in the role of fledgling Mafioso Thomas Angelo, a former taxi driver driven into the clutches of "good guy" mobster Don Salieri due to a chance encounter. Through the course of several missions, and aided by the aforementioned cinematics, you watch Thomas grow into a Made Man as he helps the Salieri family business wage war against the rival Morello clan. As expected from a game that takes its basic cues from GTA3, there is also a Free Mode, which provides a set of basic objectives to accomplish in order to accumulate cash for upgrades, as well as practice your mobster skills. Complete the story mode and you'll unlock the Extreme Free Mode, a rather torturous test of vehicular skill with fifteen-plus "driving tests" the player can participate in.

A great deal of the story portions will find you ferrying Tom and his cohorts from mission to mission, which provides a smart opportunity for the urban engine to strut its stuff. The gritty Depression-era gangland façade is perfectly assembled and meticulously crafted, featuring grungy storefronts and rambling trolleys everywhere. It's easy to get lost in the ambience, with the melodic strains of well-composed jazz riffs ringing in your ears and the orange hues of a New York sunset streaming buy as you coast across the Giulani Bridge in your rattling Bolt V8 Roadster.

The central theme is driving, and why not? The game provides the player with a vast selection of vehicles modeled after famous cars from that era, each with their own distinct look and feel. On wheels or on foot, the controls really shine, and a slick weapon selection interface makes beat downs and drive-by's alike amazingly fluid and rewarding. One gripe, however; the directional compass is pretty vague, which necessitates having the map open while you drive, which will cause quite a few accidents until you learn the lay of Lost Heaven.

The biggest strike against *Mafia*, though, lies in its inability to capitalize on the glorious urban sprawl it attempts to portray. In the story mode, the missions are so tightly scripted and linear that deviation from the strict path will lead to failure. Why bother rendering a vast city to explore if none of the promise is realized in the mission design? And in Free Mode, the limitations are all too plain: playing taxi is lethargy-inducing; random violence lacks the sense of escalation in *Grand Theft Auto*, and despite the various objectives, there really isn't very much of interest to accomplish—it's all about collecting dough from cop-capping and random crimes. It's a gritty snowglobe of a thing, and even the most violent of shakes can't keep the novelty from wearing off all too quickly. There's no doubt that *Mafia* is an urban sprawl engine first and foremost, with the mission design's lack of ambition unwilling to test its inherent potential.

Like a young Michael Corleone, you can see the strength in Illusion Softworks' favored son, even as it is held back by its weaknesses. Unlike so many other games that put their engine first, though, *Mafia* is still a fun, engaging game that provides an incredibly immersive experience. In a hobby where elves and space marines have become the hallmark of the generic, it's an offer that's hard to refuse.

UPSIDE	Visuals finer than Veronica Lake, cinematic work top-notch, controls are tighter than a Sicilian family
DOWNSIDE	Free play duller than an F. Scott Fitzgerald novel, population AI glitchy, mission design stiffer than a Sinatra highball
RATING	★★★★

Computer Games Magazine (Editors' Choice)

Computer Gaming World (Editors' Choice)

PC Gamer (Editors Choice)

"...a PC gaming classic for the Ages."

95 out of 100

PC Gamer

"The DM Client and tools elevate Neverwinter Nights into a creative medium of expression"

4.5 out of 5

Computer Gaming World

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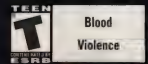

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America's Army: Operations

RATING ★★★½☆

GENRE Shooter DEVELOPER/PUBLISHER US Army REQUIREMENTS Pentium III 766, 128MB RAM, Internet connection MULTIPLAYER 2-20 Players; Internet ESRB Not Rated

Uncle Sam wants you! If you have honed your reflexes to razor sharpness through hours and hours of hardcore gaming and have the kind of chiseled physique that one can only achieve through a strict diet of cheese doodles and Jolt cola, you could be exactly what the Army is looking for.

The free, downloadable *America's Army: Operations* may be a recruiting tool in spirit, but in practice, it's a realistic online shooter. Before you can leap into action blasting your fellow potential future enlistees, you need to complete a series of training missions, which act as a kind of tutorial. Once you get through training, you're ready for action. A Gamespy powered server browser makes it very easy to find games, and there are plenty of servers to choose from, many of which are run by the Army itself. The actual missions are played in rounds, *Counterstrike* style, with each of the two teams having different objectives to meet for victory. Because this is supposed to get you excited about the good guys, each side sees their own troops as the good ole US Army and the other side as the nogoodniks through the wizardry of modern technology.

Once you get into the fray, realism is the name of the game, and the result is a very deliberate pacing. There are really only four different weapons in the game, and you can't just run out with guns blazing and expect to do well. Strategy and teamwork are at a premium.

For a free game it's hard to say anything bad about *Operations*. The graphics and sounds are very sharp and aid the overall feeling of realism. The engine is smooth and responsive, though movement is slow to the point of being restrictive. The maps are varied and extremely detailed, and are all carefully designed to emphasize the techniques required for real world success, which basically boils down to killing the other guy without giving him a good opportunity to kill you. If you're looking for a tactical online shooter, you certainly can't beat the price. —*Adam Fleet*

Welcome to basic training.

The Thing

RATING ★★★☆☆

GENRE Shape-shifting Action DEVELOPER Computer Artworks PUBLISHER Black Label Games REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 400, 64MB RAM MULTIPLAYER None ESRB Mature

***The Thing* is** a sequel, of sorts, to John Carpenter's creepy and underrated 1982 film (tagline: "Man is The Warmest Place to Hide"). You're the leader of a military rescue team sent to an Antarctic research outpost to investigate strange goings-on. Since you're taking orders from the guy that plays Cigarette Smoking Man on *The X-Files*, you know there's going to be trouble. Sure enough, trouble comes in the form of an alien that likes to take the shape of any living thing it bumps into along the way.

Though gameplay-wise, it's a fairly typical third-person action game, *The Thing* features superb production values, a few exciting action sequences, and delivers tons of gore for its eight hours-or-so of entertainment. Its main innovation—the notion that in order to succeed you must earn the trust of the members of your team—is novel but underdeveloped. Each character has different levels of trust and fear, which in theory goes from soldiers refusing orders to turning their guns on you to vomiting in the presence of a particularly grisly scene or committing suicide. But it's practically a binary system: hand a distrustful guy a weapon and some ammo and he's your friend; accidentally shoot him and he gets (justifiably) angry and distrustful. However, the interface for directing your teammates is simple and effective, and the soldier AI, particularly in the combat sequences, is excellent.

More proof that vomit makes or breaks a game. Your teammates can't quite keep lunch down when they stumble on some of the more grisly scenes.

Though the storyline is faithful to the movie, there are occasional gaps in the narrative. You often go from Point A to B without knowing exactly how or why, and your teammates are constantly coming and going with little to no explanations about why you're leaving them behind. This lack of camaraderie also makes the moments your teammates turn into "Things" particularly anticlimactic. The conversions are all canned; your engineer never changes over when you need him to open a door down the road.

Few games successfully pull off horror and tension, and *The Thing* is no exception. Though certainly better than most movie adaptations, it's something of a minor disappointment. You can see the potential in its individual parts, but the whole lacks flair. —*Steve Bauman*

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So, um, Fritz... where's the girls camp?

Prisoner of War

RATING ★★★½

GENRE Sneaky Action DEVELOPER Wide Games PUBLISHER Codemasters REQUIREMENTS Pentium 500, 128MB RAM MULTIPLAYER None ESRB Teen

Prisoner of War has one foot planted in the camaraderie of *The Great Escape* and the other in the "wacky Nazi" hilarity of *Hogan's Heroes*. The gameplay isn't *Medal of Honor* action; it's more akin to the careful and methodic sneakiness of *Thief*. Your foes are barbed wire, bad timing, machine gun towers, time, and Nazis who tote dangerous flashlights. Getting caught is bad, but it's more frustrating than deadly.

You portray the intrepid and gung-ho Captain Lewis Stone, who's shot down over German POW camps. He lands safely but gets caught right away and placed in a holding camp. Can he get out in time? The two AI controlled prisoners he meets also tried to escape, but they quit in frustration, and you may share their fate. This is a demanding, methodic, and puzzle-oriented game. Failing means starting over from a save point or losing a valuable day. Success keeps you going, because each task feels new and fresh, and the pacing is excellent.

The problem lies with the perspective; the camera system constantly gets in the way. The AI is above average and well suited for the game, but sometimes it's just plain dumb. Guards get stuck on corners or forget about you entirely after a prolonged chase, and fellow prisoners just sort of stand around doing nothing most of the time. It gives the game a feeling of lifelessness that screams, "this is a puzzle" rather than "this is a POW camp." At least the overall puzzles are good, but a little more ambiance would have sold the setting better.

Prisoner of War can be a frustrating game, but those that stick with it will find it more rewarding than flawed. Given all the shooting games coming down the pike, it's a refreshingly different take on WWII.
—Andrew S. Bub

Celtic Kings: Rage of War

RATING ★★★

GENRE Real-time Strategy DEVELOPER Haemimont Games PUBLISHER Strategy First REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 400, 64MB RAM MULTIPLAYER 2-8 players; Internet, LAN ESRB Everyone

Like the legendary hero of the Gauls so prominently featured in the game's premise, *Celtic Kings* is a sort of digital Vercingetorix. Aggressive in ambition and technically strong, it falters under its own lack of refinement and Roman-heeled polish.

It does offer a formidable force of technical accomplishments: battles that potentially feature thousands of units; hero development and unit leveling; a thoughtful unit management interface; and an expansive story-based campaign that plays a lot like a real-time version of *Heroes of Might and Magic*. In all these aspects, it is devastatingly effective—with two clicks, 50 units can be bound to a hero. Heroes gain levels and obtain magical devices, conferring their strength to allied units. And the adventure mode, which chronicles the story of the vengeful Gaul warrior Larax, makes up for its barely functional plot with an empire's worth of events, subquests, and surprises.

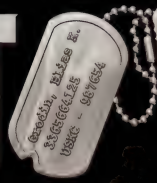
Despite a fairly limited selection of sides and units, the scope of the play renders variety a non-issue. When you have an army of 100 or more units, the scope tends to extend beyond the largely tactical consideration of unit type and more into the strategic movement of entire forces (again, facilitated by the elegant system of binding troops to heroes).

However, all is not well in what will become the state of France. *Celtic Kings* manages to tarnish its crown with a slough of irritating design oversights, the most prominent being the ease in which a unit or item can become obscured by a tree or structure, leading to arbitrary selecting and clicking. Unit feedback isn't exactly as friendly as it should be, either. And sieges? Caesar may be able to calculate the range of a catapult by sight alone, but lesser mortals would rather have an indicator than make blind guesses when attempting to pound Stonehenge into so much gravel. The engagement AI is weak, with serious clumping and poor match-ups wounding potentially elegant maneuvers. Lastly, the art direction, while stunning in its basic illustration quality, lacks any impact due to the heavy saturation of a color palette best described as "*Quake*-like."

This mass of shifting brown and grey is actually a bunch of angry "woman warriors," apparently unafraid of Joan Rivers' barbs about their unfashionable steel attire.

Celtic Kings has a solid game hiding under its dun-colored kilt, and one that real-time aficionados might find a pleasant alternative to the micromanagement antics of *WarCraft II* or the generic fantasy universe of *Warlords Battlecry 2*. Fierce and rough around the edges, developer Haemimont's heroic effort is diminished not because it lacks in innovation or mechanics, but because people expect barbarian antics to be a bit more civilized.
—Douglas L. Erickson

PLATOON



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Manage a platoon of up to 30 soldiers including medics, snipers, commandos, and engineers, each with their own personality and unique abilities.

First tactical strategy game to cover the Vietnam War from 1965 to 1968, recreating actual US Army missions.

The dynamic 3D terrain and weather effects accurately remodel the harsh Vietnamese conditions, affecting combat.

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TEEN T

CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Violence

Empire Earth: The Art of Conquest

RATING ★★

GENRE Strategy DEVELOPER Mad Doc PUBLISHER Sierra REQUIREMENTS Empire Earth MULTIPLAYER 2-8 Players; Internet, LAN ESRB Teen

Mechs stand tall in the swamps of the future. >>> (lower left) Roman conquest in progress, up close.

When designer Rick Goodman (*Age of Empires*) set out to make the ultimate eon-spanning real-time strategy game, he came up with *Empire Earth*. The result was a polished yet overwhelming mishmash of old, borrowed, and brand new ideas, many of them good enough to develop

quite a following amongst the hardest hardcore fans. Now, *Art of Conquest*, the first expansion pack, asks the question: how do you expand a game so expansive it turned off all but the most hardcore?

It answers that question by adding new bonuses or units to existing civilizations, a whole new epoch (bringing the total number of time frames to a daunting fifteen), and three single-player campaigns. The campaigns are interesting, if poorly written and horribly voice acted, taking you from the ancient world with the Romans to WWII's Pacific Theater to the vast reaches of space. It's a decent amount of content, but the quality is suspect. Each civilization gets a new bonus. The French can camouflage, the Russians mine better, and the US gets a marketplace. These are nice and clever, and add a bit to the game overall, forcing players to deal with the new situations they create.

The campaigns begin in Rome where you go from invasion to Cleopatra. It's largely successful. The WWII campaign is not. These missions are often too hard-coded to let you innovate. Lastly, you get to play a futuristic Asiatic super-power dealing with a rebellion. The exposition is tiresome, and lines like, "They're just terrorists!" and, "Look out! A suicide bomber!" scream poor taste. Things get more interesting when the campaign actually takes you into space but it never really takes advantage of its setting. It essentially replaces water textures with black starry ones and makes island landmasses round so it can call them "planets." Its best feature is a toggle that prevents rivals from invading your little "island Earth" until they reach the Space Epoch, which finally gives you a way to play the game at a more leisurely pace.

Overall, though, *The Art of Conquest* is an artless expansion. Aside from some of the new bonuses and the Space map/Epoch, it really doesn't add anything worth its price tag. —*Andrew S. Bub*

Links 2003

RATING ★★★★½

GENRE Golf DEVELOPER/PUBLISHER Microsoft REQUIREMENTS Pentium 500, 64 MB RAM MULTIPLAYER 2-4 players; Internet, LAN ESRB Everyone

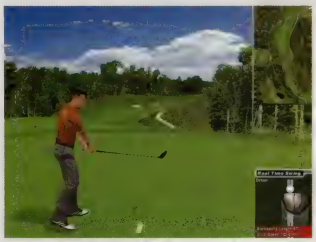
The hottest trend in computer golf over the last few years is the ability to swing with the mouse—the tired tri-click method is dying a slow and deserving death. The venerable *Links* franchise needed a more contemporary swing method in order to attract new fans, and with *Links 2003*, it's here, and it's good. Microsoft calls its new swing interface, oddly enough, "Real Time Swing" (RTS). It's unforgiving on the harder levels of difficulty and makes for a more challenging, rewarding, and exciting game of golf.

RTS comes at a price. If you decide to use this swing method—Powerstroke and Tri-Click are still options—you cannot use the game's Dynamic Camera that follows the ball in flight. You're forced to watch from the golfer's perspective.

At least the golfers look good. As polygonal ones replace the previous year's digitized bitmap golfers, this allows you to view the player close up rather than from a distance and also looks more realistic—the golfer looks like part of the scenery rather than a pasted image. The courses, all six of them, also look fantastic and feature a lot more detail than in previous versions. The only issue is that the environments remain static; unlike EA's *Tiger Woods*, the trees are motionless and the oceans frozen.

Multiplayer is decent enough, and playing a tournament through e-mail is a remarkable addition, but playing online takes a lot of time. Once you're used to Headgate's revolutionary ReadyGolf multiplayer format, first seen in Sierra's *PGA 2000*, the old format just takes too long when you have a complete foursome.

After a few years of treading water, *Links* is finally back where it belongs, at the upper level of PC golf simulations. While RTS breathes needed life into the series, the additions of a wonderful season/career mode complete with Q-School, Semi-Pro, and Pro Tours, the ability to convert old courses, a more user-friendly course designer, and arguably the best physics model in the genre help make *Links 2003* the most complete golf title on the market. —*William Abner*



Golfers are now fully animated; they'll even show a little waggle.

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Dirt Track Racing 2

RATING ★★★★

GENRE Dirty Racing **DEVELOPER** Ratbag
PUBLISHER Infogrames Entertainment
REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 450, 128MB RAM
MULTIPLAYER 2-10 players; Internet, LAN
ESRB Everyone

It's sideways or the highway on dirt!

If it ain't broke, don't fix it. That's an accurate description of *Dirt Track Racing 2*. Each game in the series from Ratbag (which includes *Sprint Cars* and some Australian-only games) has added different cars to the mix but left the gameplay engine alone, offering a satisfying blend of arcade and simulation style play.

You find yourself behind the wheel of Pro Stocks, Late Models and the newly added Modifieds in this iteration. All the basics are here including convenient quick races and the long term career mode. Added from *Sprint Cars* is the ability to create and save your own replays. Given the game-friendly real-life event schedules of heat, consolation and feature races which take only about fifteen minutes to complete, you can quickly enjoy an entire event.

The AI infuses all modes with robust but variable challenge. A career is still the best way to enjoy the offline game and with lots of upgrades available to each division of cars, as well as many racing series to enter, you'll find a lot to tinker with. Unfortunately, yellow flags are still hokey. Restarts occur while cars are colliding wherever the game chooses. Flipping a car and continuing on is common, ripping you out of the excellent driving simulation when it happens.

Take the game online, and you'll find a cozy group of players that are helpful and excited about the game's cars. Since these cars usually race for 10-30 laps in the real world, the online experience easily replicates a night at the track. It's a blast once you spend enough time on setups to become competitive. *Dirt Track Racing 2* won't win any awards for originality, but a nice graphical facelift and the addition of the modifieds provides justification for fans both old and new to snatch it up at its budget price. —*David J. Long*

Virtual Resort: Spring Break

RATING ★★★

GENRE Location-sim **DEVELOPER** Deep Red
PUBLISHER Eidos **REQUIREMENTS** Pentium II 450MHz, 128MB RAM **MULTIPLAYER** None
ESRB Teen

It wouldn't be Spring Break without a wet T-shirt contest.

***Spring Break* has** a lot in common with *Tropico*. You manage a little tropical island by plopping down buildings and adjusting wages, all in the hopes of making everyone happy while inflating your bank account. The developer, Deep Red, turned in a surprisingly sophisticated mass-market game with *Monopoly Tycoon*, and at first glance it appears they've succeeded at recreating that success.

There's a lot to like about this little environment-management game, known as *Beach Life* in the U.K. The graphics are sharp and the stars, your vacationers, are exceptionally well treated. They have lots of funny thoughts, scores of fantastic animations, and a few silly sound effects. It's really a treat to watch them running around your resort wind-surfing, pounding down beers, getting into cat-fights, and making out on the beach. Since watching your people is so interesting, it's a shame *Tropico's* super-up-close zoom level isn't shared. The first half-dozen scenarios in the linear campaign are a total cakewalk, but you'll be having plenty of fun discovering all the nifty things the vacationers can do.

Then it rains on your little beach getaway. Most of the game is a breeze, but the last several scenarios—and there are only twelve—are brutally hard. The maps are all pre-generated, so there's only twelve islands to play on. This renders the sandbox mode almost useless, since you can only play each location once you've unlocked it in the linear campaign. You can't rotate the map, only buildings. Painstakingly bulldozing every shrub in the way of the building you're trying to place is annoying. The music is totally mediocre, though at least you can drop your own MP3s into the music folder and make your own playlist.

After a couple of hours the charm wears off, leaving you with a game that offers no depth, only some boredom. More scenarios in a non-linear campaign coupled with random map generation would add tremendously to the replay value and life of a game that falls just shy of having what it takes to hang around on your hard drive. —*Jason Cross*

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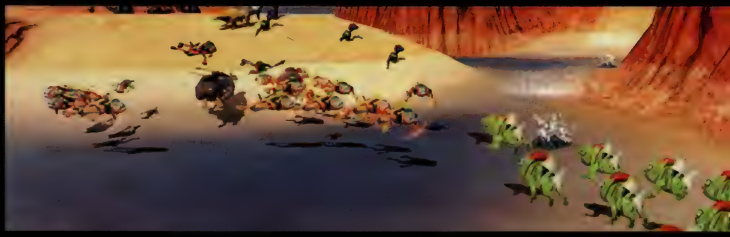
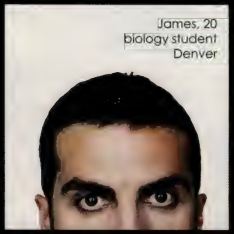
YOU'RE BEING ATTACKED (HALF PIRANHA / HALF

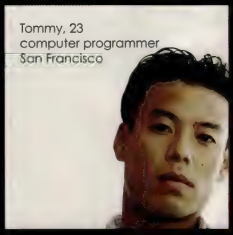




James, 20
biology student
Denver

Jessie the Kid: let's face it. The only good Pirawolf is a dead Pirawolf.

You need to have balance. A good air combat squadron of Vulturesharks, plus a battalion of Hyenadragons, and finally, Turtlelions for the amphibious fights. "Snakes and snails with scorpion tails." These are what real men are made of.



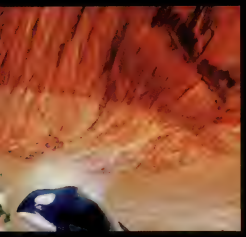
Tommy, 23
computer programmer
San Francisco

Violence
Comic Mischief

Microsoft game studios

relic

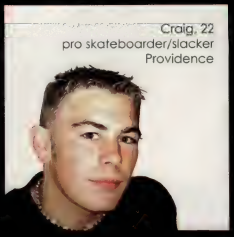
BY AN ARMY OF PIRAWOLVES WOLF)....WHAT WILL YOU DO?

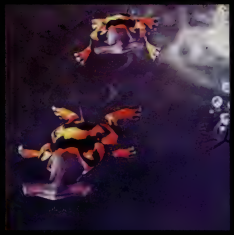


cjm1565: send in my goons. Eagorillas and Rhinobulls.

These boys will punish anything. If the French had them, they wouldn't have needed us in WWII.

END OF STORY, BIZATCH!





Tom Tom: let's just say,

MAJOR PAIN IN THE...;)

A Tigebra is pretty wicked, or a Tiganzee. Haven't tried a tiger and a rhino yet.

My bet is it terminates with extreme prejudice. I like that.

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OUT of the BOX

mass appeal

How to develop a shooter for the modders... and why you probably shouldn't

What makes a shooter popular with the modding masses? It's the great unanswerable question, isn't it? One that developers trying to follow in the footsteps of John Carmack and his cronies at id Software have puzzled over since *Quake* all but single-handedly created the mod community in 1996. Hit upon the right combination of 1s and 0s and you've accomplished the programming equivalent of turning lead into gold.

And as any self-respecting alchemist will tell you, that isn't an easy task. A perfect illustration of that point is Monolith's *No One Lives Forever*, a critical favorite that didn't go over as well with the gaming public. Although its sales were respectable enough to warrant a sequel [see page 78], only a few users bothered to create maps or play the game extensively online. Its send-up of 1960s spy movies that was equal parts James Bond and Austin Powers, many innovative levels, and UNITY versus HARM team multiplayer modes aroused little serious interest. It never got close to the big leagues, populated by hits like *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault*, *Return to Castle Wolfenstein*, *Battlefield 1942*, and the plethora of *Half-Life* mods best exemplified these days by *Counter-strike* and *Day of Defeat*.

Why this should have been the case is hard to fathom, initially. A game as good as *No One Lives Forever* should have sold extremely well and inspired a legion of modders. In a vacuum, this probably would have happened. But such a development was impossible. The Monolith game was created with the Lithtech engine, a foreign language to modders used to white bread staples like *Quake III* and *Half-Life*. If the game had been based on the *Quake III* engine, as was the mega-selling *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault*, you likely could have added another zero to the sales figures. Also, the subject matter was a little too quirky. Bell-bottom spy satire was a great concept, but incorporating the Lara Croft Babe Factor was poorly thought out. Monolith apparently didn't stop to think that having a stunner like Cate Archer as the lead wouldn't matter when men could only ogle her during the cutscenes. Which became a further problem as the between-mission banter was often stretched past the point of frustration to allow the young male target audience ample opportunity to gaze at Archer's ample cleavage.

Use this as an example and it becomes easier to figure out what it takes to make a shooter that will appeal to the mod community at large. You have to begin with the *Quake III* or *Unreal* engines. Anything else and you're asking for trouble; *Half-Life*'s too old and everything else is off-beat. Your storyline mustn't stray too far from traditional themes. Think military over monsters at present—even the sci-fi quasi-military of *Unreal Tournament*. Being lighthearted isn't a good idea. Humor can be well received, though it should be rendered in a cynical or action-movie-hero style. Consider *Grand Theft Auto III*, where "funny" involves using prostitutes to regain health, as the optimal expression of humor in gaming right now. Play too fast and loose and you'll lose modders, who don't want to waste time working for free on a game that the paid developers considered to be a joke. I know that's unfair to the developers at Monolith, who painstakingly created sublimely humorous scenes in every level of *No One Lives Forever*, but let's be realistic—modders adopt screen names like StoneKiller and Deathadder for a reason.

As with anything creative, however, sticking to a recipe is not a good thing. Even though modders would likely be happy with rehashes, the community would grow stagnant without blasts of fresh air from out-there stuff like *No One Lives Forever*, *Thief*, and *Deus Ex*. That all three are being continued as series by their respective publishers is a great thing for computer gaming as a whole and mod-making in particular, although I have to wonder about the future vitality of the genre when something as straightforward (but as incredibly addictive, I've got to admit) as *Battlefield 1942* is the new standard-bearer. For that reason, I hope that I'm able to write about the mod community rallying around *A Spy in H.A.R.M.'s Way* in future months, and that the unanswerable question remains unanswered. ●

Bewitching Neverwinter Nights

The next big thing in *Neverwinter Nights* is coming from the official developers. Witchwork, a series of modules being crafted by BioWare's Rob Bartel with the assistance of a small group of testers. It will introduce a new campaign setting far removed from the Forgotten Realms. Little is being revealed about this land, although BioWare characterizes it as "darker in tone" than traditional *Dungeons & Dragons* worlds. Role-playing will take precedence over hack-and-slash action in the plot, said to revolve around the power of witches. Custom death and conversation systems are being created for the series, which will also utilize the DM's Helper application created by fans Joseph Hardesty and Richard Scheepstra. The death system appears to be similar to that featured in *Planescape: Torment*, in that characters must die a certain number of times to unveil aspects of the story. Die too many times, however, and your character winds up "banished to a hell from which there is no escape." The first installment of the open-ended series, Witchwork I: The Fields of Battle, is being geared for first-level players and should be available by the time this magazine hits newsstands.

NEVERWINTER NIGHTS
nwn.bioware.com

Mod Tools You Can't Refuse

Modders are already taking aim at Illusion Softworks' sleeper hit *Mafia*. If you're interested in getting a piece of the action, download MassaSnygga's MafiaXTractor, which lets you extract all of the data from the game's dta files. This includes models, textures, movies, and sounds. The program also patches the game so that it can read extracted dta files, allowing edited sections to be easily incorporated back into play. Hunnenkönig's separate MafiaEditor program gives users the ability to edit text in dta files, which will come in handy for those who want to design new missions.

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An Early Frost

If you've wrapped up your explorations in *Icewind Dale II*, consider taking a fresh look at the original. Two mini-mods that enhance gameplay, add new monsters, and even incorporate an additional quest or two are now available for download. Nathan Bunch's Winter's Bane features 17 new spells, 43 new items, a new character with unique abilities and equipment, and a number of rule tweaks. Project Auril comes courtesy of the Chosen of Mystra forum group and includes a new quest, enhanced areas, and pumped-up monsters.

THE CHOSEN OF MYSTRA (PROJECT AURIL)
chosenofmystra.db-forge.com/com_forums/yabbse
WINTER'S BANE (OFFICIAL SITE)
www.frontiernet.net/~nfbunch/wb/main.html

Are You Ready for Some Football?

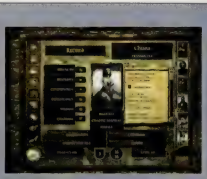
Having trouble telling a Dime from a 4-3 front in *Madden NFL 2003*? If so, you might want to surf to Madden Guides, a web site dedicated to analyzing all of the Xs and Os in the *Madden* playbooks. In addition to going over the basics—don't get into a play-calling rut, learn to emphasize your team's strengths—the site covers such intricacies as how to beat cover defenses, how to best utilize the halfback sweep/toss, and how to defend in every possible situation. A Definitions page sums up pigskin terminology from Audible to Unsportsmanlike Conduct, while another section covers franchise options such as the salary cap. Some aspects of the site were clearly written with the console versions of *Madden* in mind, and others had yet to be updated with information specific to the current version of the game as of my last visit, though all of the information here can be applied to any edition of *Madden*, on any platform.

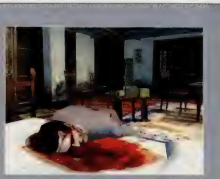
MADDEN GUIDES
www.maddenguides.com

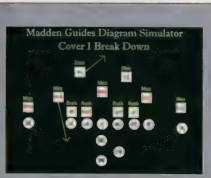
BARGAIN BIN

Amerzone

Fans of Benoit Sokal's *Syberia* might want to check out *Amerzone*, the first adventure by the graphic novelist turned game designer. Although a bit on the short side, beautiful visuals and a stylish, surreal setting make the game worth every cent of the ten bucks that Ubi Soft now asks for it. [Ubi Soft/1999]







A new character is one of the Winter's Bane additions to Icewind Dale. >>> Hodding mob hits is easy with the MafiaXTractor editor. >>> Keep track of Madden's Xs and Os at Madden Guides.

Toys in the Attic

Toys for Bob is revisiting the legendary Star Control II, and plans on giving it away for free

by Brett Todd

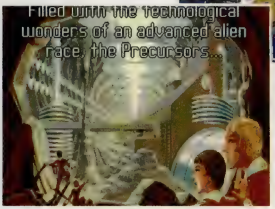
Paul Reiche III has left his mark on the computer gaming industry. Even though relative latecomers to the party such as John Carmack and Cliff Bleszinski get most of the accolades and magazine covers, Reiche has quietly helped create some of the most important titles in the history of the business. *Archon* and *Murder on the Zinderneuf*—early classics for the Commodore 64 and Atari 800 that helped put Electronic Arts on the map—are just two of the many reasons why gamers should be grateful that Reiche chose programming over other careers.

"I'm not amazed that I'm still in this business after 20 years, but I am delighted," he says. "The game business can be weird and fickle, but I can't imagine finding a career more fun and stimulating, except perhaps carving frightening sculptures in Antarctic glacier cliffs with explosives, dynamite, and lasers. So far, no one has responded to my inquiries about that job, but I do keep sending out my résumé."

Reviving a classic

Which is something of a blessing, both for the wildlife at the bottom of the world and for gamers. If Reiche had gone off to blow up mountains of ice, the local penguin population probably wouldn't have been too impressed by the racket. And gamers wouldn't get another chance to play *Star Control II: The Ur-Quan Masters*, a true groundbreaking game that retains a cult following even though a decade has passed since it was published by Accolade. Toys for Bob, the design studio founded by Reiche and long-time friend Fred Ford in 1990, is currently working on a free version of the game for Windows, all varieties of MacOS, Linux, and BeOS. Although incompatibilities between the old DOS-dependent code and post-Windows 95 operating systems have rendered the classic all but unplayable for a number of years now, that won't be the case for much longer.

Star Control II remains absurdly popular with veteran gamers (e.g.: fan fiction, and lots of it), largely because it made such a lasting impression. Rich storytelling was combined with expansive gameplay to create a living and breathing universe. There you indulged your *Star Trek* dreams and took command of a powerful starship constructed with little-understood alien technology. Your goal was to use this advanced vessel to battle the Ur-Quan, a species of warmongering octopi bent on conquering Earth and its pals in the Alliance of Free Stars. The road to victory was an arduous one featuring the exploration of strange new worlds, contact with new life and new civilizations, and boldly going into combat against enemy spaceships. Role-playing and strategy went hand-in-hand with an open-ended plot that allowed you to save the universe in whatever way you preferred.



Part of the original's appeal was the captivating story.

Everything new is old again

The port will preserve all of the integrity of the original, as Toys for Bob doesn't plan on radically changing things. The only significant difference will be in regard to the official name, which because of legal issues with current rights holder, Infogrames, will be known simply as *The Ur-Quan Masters*. Other than that, you should find everything right where you left it. According to programmer Chris Nelson, it's being built from the source code for the 3DO version of the game, as much of the PC code has been lost. Thankfully, enough of the PC code has survived for the design team to pick and choose between the two versions at times, depending on what works best.

"Basically, we're using the 3DO code, and when we discover something that the PC code does better, for our purposes, we swap that in," explains Nelson, during a programming break. "At its most basic level, this project is more or less a straight port of the 3DO game, with the main new fea-

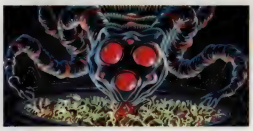
ture being the ability for fans to modify and add on to the game."

Nelson approaches this job from a fan's perspective as well. Like so many others, he fondly remembers *Star Control II* because he hadn't played any game that even approached it previously. The conversations, music, melee combat, story, and humor stuck with Nelson for a long time after he'd moved on to other games. This is giving him added motivation with his work on the port, as he hopes to spread the joy to a new generation of gamers who missed out on this great experience the first time around.

Changes will be left up to you

Fanatics will be rewarded well for their decade-long devotion. Everything about the port will be left open so that they can modify all aspects of the original game. Toys for Bob is converting all of the files to common formats, making it simple to alter conversations, add plotlines, or even rewrite much of the game from scratch. Every one of the text, voice, graphic, font, music, sound effect, and script files will be there for the editing. Seeing as the online *Star Control* community is so enthusiastic, it shouldn't take long for mods and total conversions to hit the web. Expect a number of unofficial sequels to crop up within weeks of the port's release.

"We're doing everything we can to make the game as easy as possible for the fans to modify and improve," says Nelson. "All of the media is being saved in open formats, such as pngs, mp3 or ogg, and wavs. We also plan to allow people to drop in videos as cutscenes at key parts in the game. Furthermore, we're releasing the source code under the GNU GPL open source license, which allows for even more interesting modifications, such as Internet melee, or a randomized galaxy generator. I'm sure the fans will provide even more ideas that none of us have even thought of yet."



Early concept artwork of an Ur-Quan. Cute, isn't he?

What's a port without a few improvements?

One item from the fans' wish list has already come true. The musical score—one of the most beloved features of *Star Control II*—will be presented in both its original 1992 format and in a modernized remix. Riku Nuottajärvi, one of the musicians responsible for the original soundtrack (you'll remember his hyperspace theme), has reassembled nearly all of his coworkers from a decade ago and is spearheading the creation of new tunes based on the old ones. Dan Nicholson, Aaron Grier, Eric Berge, Kevin Palivec, Alek Benedict, and Erol Otus (whose artwork you might recall from the early days of TSR, where he worked with Reiche on *Dungeons & Dragons* modules) have signed up to help with the project. What they've come up with is apparently right in line with what was featured in the original game. And since the port is designed so that you can switch from new to old with the click of a mouse, even purists with the sensibilities of Comic Book Guy won't be able to make a fuss.

An online multiplayer mode is also being considered. This option would closely resemble the original's supermelee game, where two players constructed fleets and then battled it out for galactic supremacy. Toys for Bob is also looking at enhanced support for modern gamepads and allowing users to develop multi-language plugins so that those outside the English-speaking world can enjoy the port.

Right now, however, many details have yet to be finalized. What will be included in the final product remains up in the air, principally because Nelson has been recruiting the assistance of fans to make the *Star Control II* reissue bigger and better. There is now a page at SourceForge.net where the general public can offer assistance with development. Regular updates on the progress of the port can also be found on the many *Star Control* fan web sites. An official release date has yet to be announced, although if all goes well, you should be waging war against the slimy Ur-Quan before the end of this year.

TOYS FOR BOB
www.toysforbob.com
SOURCEFORGE.NET: THE UR-QUAN MASTERS SUMMARY
sourceforge.net/projects/sc2/
THE PAGES OF NOW AND FOREVER – ALL ABOUT STAR CONTROL
www.classicgaming.com/starcontrol
MAGIC BOX TOYS FOR BOB FAN SITE
home.att.ne.jp/wave/rainbow/Toys_for_Bob

THE UNIVERSE JUST GOT

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EVERYONE

E

CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Violence

A LITTLE MORE:

a) Exciting
b) Dangerous
c) Crowded
d) All of the above

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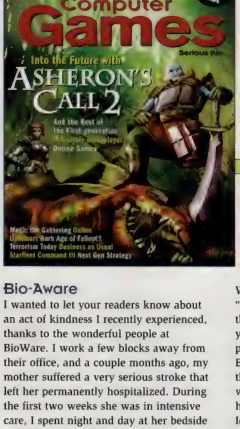

Satire: (n) A literary work in which human vice or folly is attacked through irony, derision, or wit. Irony, sarcasm, or caustic wit used to attack or expose folly, vice, or stupidity. Or alternately, it's an article about a pirate who complains about the quality of his illegally acquired games. But before we get into the letters commenting on our "Piracy" article in October, we have an uplifting little story about a developer that went a bit above and beyond the call of duty to show how much it cares about its fans…

Bio-Aware

I wanted to let your readers know about an act of kindness I recently experienced, thanks to the wonderful people at BioWare. I work a few blocks away from their office, and a couple months ago, my mother suffered a very serious stroke that left her permanently hospitalized. During the first two weeks she was in intensive care, I spent night and day at her bedside and was unable to go to work. A good friend of mine contacted a staff member at BioWare to ask when *Neverwinter Nights* was going to be released as he wanted to pick up one of the first copies for me, hoping it would help to get my mind off of my family tragedy.

Well, the folks at BioWare went him one better. My friend came by my workplace and hand-delivered a copy of the game autographed by everyone in BioWare's office. Needless to say, I was deeply touched.

In a time when customer service seems to have dwindled, and big companies have all but lost touch with the consumer, BioWare stands out as an example of how to do things right. Fantastic games created by genuinely caring people.

Thank you again, BioWare, for brightening up a very dark time in my life.

Peter Bagan
Edmonton, Alberta

In other "why you should probably like BioWare" news, in celebrating 100 days of availability for Neverwinter Nights, the company teamed with its publisher Atari, Creative Labs, Intel, NVIDIA, and XFX in rewarding the game's community leaders with some recognition and some cool hardware gifts (Pentium 4s, video cards, etc.). Très cool, BioWare. —ed

Sinking Pirates

I'm very disappointed in you people. Why would you publish a story like "Pirate Sunk by Gaming Booty" [CGM 143] that encourages criminal behavior? At least you could have posted the picture (without privacy fuzzies) in a full page as a WANTED CRIMINAL poster. How can a person that owns two machines with more hardware, and more powerful than mine, state he has, "little or no disposable income?" Idiots like this is one of the reasons games are costly and should be locked up, not written about.

Next time you are hurting for an article, do a spread on Barney the dinosaur with a full fold out picture; at least it isn't promoting illegal behavior. And if this article is a joke, it is in very poor taste and should never been considered.

John

We would never stoop so low as to do a story on Barney. He's pure evil. —ed

Technically, Mr. No-name wasn't the one who was cheated, but he does have a legitimate point: game developers are slacking off, relying on a shiny box and outrageous graphics to sell the game.

Just think if developers focused on the making good games like in the old days! It would be glory! We need a developer dedicated to good gaming, not money.

BlackRage_9004

The guy is a hypocrite. Pirating causes the price of games to rise, and quality is worse because they do not have as big a budget as they should have. Maybe if he bought games instead of just criticizing them, the gameplay would be better.

Volkov

Harder than Hardcore

As I read Tom Chick's column from the October issue of your magazine ["God Mode is for Babies"], I realized I was his idea of a hardcore gamer in many ways. I always start a new game before I finish an old one so I never end up finishing any of them. I always invert my mouse in shooters, and I never use cheat codes.

I don't know whether that makes me a hardcore gamer or not, but that's beside the point. The point is, as a group hardcore gamers are fine, but many go around making fun of every new gamer they can find just for fun, and this kind of hardcore gamer is extremely annoying. They're usually the ones with no lives who always say things like roXXors, n00b, and things of that nature. There's nothing wrong with this in general, it's just really annoying when people like you look down on everyone else.

Don Egan

Just wanted to say that the smallest details in articles like Tom Chick's Three Finger Salute in the October issue don't go unnoticed. I still remember flipping through the channels one time and finding World News Tonight, where instantly I was met by a jolly fat kid yelling "Sayonara, hooker!" as he blew away a prostitute in *Grand Theft Auto III*. Ah, good memories. Thanks, Mr. Chick.

Jon B.

That did make for a wonderful TV moment, didn't it? Kind of like Fonzie jumping the shark in Happy Days. —ed

Brain Games

After reading the article "This is Your Brain on Games," [CGM 143], I became very troubled. I'm 15-years old, and games take up a large chunk of my time. But I can think of several reasons this misguided scientist's theory could be wrong. One, there are no special features or radiations in games that would cause a specific syndrome, and two, game designers play games all the time, yet they can churn out creative ideas (or perhaps it's the reason they can't. Hmmm...).

Anyway, it would put my remaining brain cells at ease if you could post an update on this topic in a future issue of your magazine when and if one becomes available.

El Mariachi

To 3D or Not to 3D

I couldn't agree more with Phil Steinmeyer's "Inside the Sausage Factory" article about 3D games ["I Hate 3D"]. The obsession with all things 3D could very well be the death knell that this industry has been dreading for so long. Developers and gamers alike think that games have to be 3D in order to be good. Nowhere is the absurdity of that belief more evident than in the area of real-time strategy games. Not only is it unnecessary in this genre, it's also detrimental—who has time to move the camera when they are in the middle of a massive battle?

The focus should be on crafting quality games instead of creating an impressive 3D engine. *StarCraft* has been a bestseller for five years while countless 3D titles litter the bargain bin.

Mark Longo

I couldn't agree more with Steinmeyer's comments on 3D gaming. Why does everything have to be 3D now, when sprites still look so good. Take *WarCraft III*, for example. It's just another 3D real-time strategy game with a great storyline, but that's it. In every other respect, *Warlords Battlecry II* is the better game, but it's just not 3D. And in my opinion, its 2D sprites still look a lot better than *WarCraft III*'s chunky graphics.

Until the technology is up to it, keep 3D in the simulators and shooters, where it belongs.

St George the High Elf Paladin

Garage Rock

This is in response to a part of Steve Bauman's Upfront editorial in the October 2002 issue ["I Love Everything"]. You praise the garage rock movement and wonder when a similar one will occur in the gaming industry. In the spirit of your article, I love it when a game magazine bemoans something they have a lot of control to change.

As the editor of a popular PC gaming magazine, you are in the position to jumpstart the movement by giving some exposure to the "smaller, quality" games that are out there. Instead, when you find a small game, you occasionally use the opportunity to bash it in a review so that you can show your audience how fair your reviews are and how you don't give *every* game a high score... only the ones that slip some cash into your bank account. And I'm not talking about putting in a little blurb about the newest, greatest *Half-Life* or *Neverwinter Nights* mod... I want to see some effort put into exposing small great standalone games.

Neon Noodle

Where are these great, little, standalone games you speak of? Seriously, if they're out there, we want to know about them. And where are the small games we bash to show how "edgy" we are? Are we supposed to recommend crap games solely because they're "small"? That makes no sense either. —ed

Slave to Britney

In Andrew Bub's review of *Britney's Dance Beat* in the October issue, he said, "there isn't a dance mat controller for the PC and, until now, there hasn't been a dancing game either." I beg to differ. They offer the game *Pump it Up* (basically the Korean version of *Dance Dance*) and pads at www.redoctane.com.

More resources for playing DDR-type games for the PC are available at ddr.blackbird.nu/gettingstarted.html

Sean Duggan

Thanks for the info, though we're somewhat disturbed that someone actually read our review of Britney's Dance Beat. —ed

Resisting Resistance

Whoever reviewed *Operation Flashpoint: Resistance* in your October issue [that would be Tom Chick —ed] hasn't learned much from the original version. In my opinion, it's a must-have for any fan of the series. It's way better than the original, both in graphics and tactical options. It's also more immersive.

Wasakero

It's Magic... the Gathering

I found your review of *Magic the Gathering Online* [CGM 143] very nice and complimentary, but I fear you forgot to mention one very important thing. Whenever you collect a full set of cards, you can redeem them for real life cards. I mention this because readers might be afraid they will never see a return on the investment.

Richard Dow

Random Incoherence

Damn you, Ed, your warning about nose vomit [Rebound, CGM 143] induced nose vomit.

Greenbarron

I need a hug... but not from Steve Bauman, cuz, you know, that'd be really awkward and stuff.

Fred Cordes

Will someone please give Fred a very masculine, non-sexual, hug? —ed

ERRATA

We got the name of Panther Games first title incorrect in our review of Airborne Assault. It was Fire Brigade, not Red Brigade. We regret the mistake.

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CINDY YANS

road to nowhere

ode on a franchise burn

Attempting to transcend the constraints of a medium

What's in a name? That which we call Dude, Where's My Car?
By any other name would smell as <cough> sweet.
So Men-in-Black-the-game would, were it not Men-in-Black called,
Retain that slick hilarity which it owes
Without that title.

Right? Not necessarily.

A few years ago, I talked about the fate of games based on the ownership of (or the cleverly-attained rights to the use of) various film or television properties, and bemoaned the fact that rarely did we see anyone "get it right." I hypothesized that publishers with a hot license gave short shrift to the development side of the project, assuming that in order to profit or break even, they only needed to sell the name. After all, LucasArts has made so many bad *Star Wars* games that you have to wonder…. So as I was wondering (which only happens when certain planets are in alignment or when I'm performing cerebral activities like scouring the bathroom), it occurred to me that the explanation about who or what is at fault when these initially tantalizing products simply don't work is a whole lot simpler than I had imagined. You can attribute it to this: you can't mix apples and oranges. Please do quote me.

Designers have been trying to build compelling interactive gamestories since there have been story-based games. The dinosaur…ahem…the veteran game designer Chris Crawford has written a billion rather didactic but interesting articles that explore the concept of "Interactive Storytelling" (although he eschews that phrase). "One of the points of confusion that I often encounter in talking about interactivity with writers is their confusion of non-linearity with interactivity," says Crawford. "They recognize that conventional stories are linear, and interactivity isn't like a conventional story, and at this point in their thinking they insert the concept of non-linearity. The thinking seems to be that, if they could only design a 'nonlinear story', whatever that might be, then they've attained interactivity, or something worthwhile." Epic's *Unreal* designer Cliff Bleszinski, wunderkind to Crawford's elder-wunder, puts it more simply. He says, "It's hard to make a game."

Holders of these golden licenses have little leeway in their attempts to build stories in a ground-up or top-down fashion. Too much content and presupposition already exists, be it in a novel, film, television show, or any other non-interactive medium.

Simon Price, an analyst for International Development Group said, "A licensed game still has to be a good game to sell well, but not necessarily as good a game as a nonlicensed game. The Hollywood license will carry some of the heavy lifting for the game." Well certainly it will, but until someone figures out how to really translate linear prose, film, and television into interactive media (and no one has so far), we'll still come up short.

So you see, I'm fairly skeptical about the upcoming *Tron*, *The Matrix*, and the *Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter* sequels. And it seems that the inverse is true as well. Check out this filmography: *Super Mario Brothers* (1993), *Double Dragon* (1993), *Street Fighter* (1994), *Mortal Kombat* and *Mortal Kombat: Annihilation* (1995), *Wing Commander* (1999), *Battle Arena Toshinden* (1997), *Samurai Showdown* (1995), *Fatal Fury* and *Fatal Fury 2* (1994-95), *Final Fantasy: Legend of the Crystals* (1994), *Tekken* (1998), *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (2001), *Final Fantasy, The Spirits Within* (2001), and more! Almost all would agree that these so-called technoludic films lack the meat found in their videogame counterparts. There simply isn't enough to engage us, because the games require something from us that films simply do not: input. Remember when *Clue*-the-movie tried to engage audiences into "voting" about which of the three endings the cinema should play during a given showing? Woohoo, interactivity! Not. And before I begin to drag Marshall McLuhen into this, I'd better stop…

Each of the media that we are faced with on a day-to-day basis has a different requirement at its core. And that's OK. But for those who still think that they may be able to harness the true essence of any one of them during and after its translation to another—and there will be those who will still try—good luck. At any rate, I don't think we'll be seeing *Anna Karenina 3D*, *Of Mice and Men and 'Mechs*, or *The Brothers Karamazov Online* anytime soon. Thank goodness. ●

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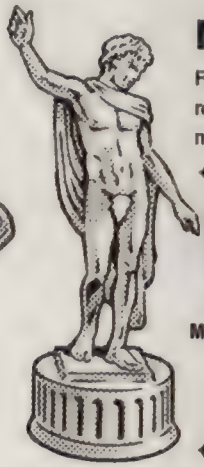

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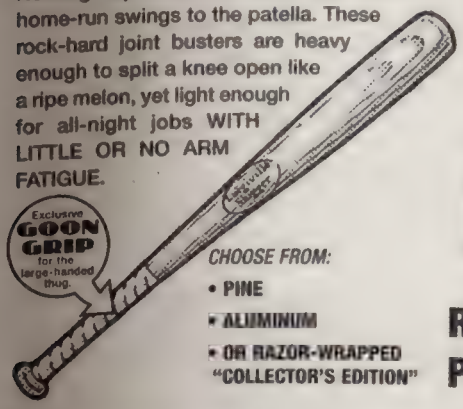

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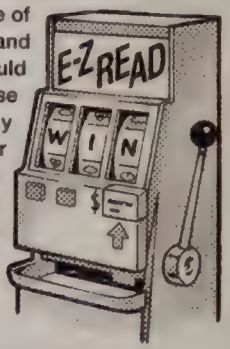

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PHIL STEINMEYER

INSIDE the sausage factory

come on in, the water's fine...

(And you don't even have to quit your day job...)

So you just plunked down your hard-earned cash on *Turnip Tycoon* and discovered the game sucks. "They've got the growing seasons all wrong, and they definitely need to add the ability to grow rutabagas, too," you say to yourself. Rather than just nursing your wounds and hoping that *Sim Swine Farm* will be better, consider moving to the next level and actually participating in the game industry. There are numerous ways to have an impact on the game industry, and you don't even have to get a job as a minimum wage tester of *Pokemon Purple* to take part.

The simplest way to participate is via web forums. They let you read a broad variety of opinions about specific games and industry trends, and you can share your own pearls of wisdom quite easily, too. They offer the easiest and most direct link between game developers and game players, and most major forums have several game industry participants, plus a larger number who lurk without posting.

Your possible impact on the industry from posting is three-fold. First, forum participants help steer other gamers away from bad games and toward good ones. They help create word-of-mouth buzz for the industry in the same way the office water cooler does for movies and music.

Second, every major game developer regularly reads the forums concerning their own games. Forum feedback helps developers prioritize bug fixes and new features, and can even influence which games get sequels. We chose to do *Railroad Tycoon II* in part because the original *Railroad Tycoon* was still legendary in the forums five years after its original release.

Finally, game developers sometimes strike up on-line conversations with posters that may lead to the poster getting his or her first chance to do industry work. My company PopTop has used several freelancers who we discovered through forums and/or fan sites, and many other game developers have, too. Within the last 30 days, I've read forums for our own games at www.cafetropico.com and www.heavengames.com, and I've also read more generalized industry forums at www.gonegold.com, www.bluesnews.com, www.quartertothree.com, and yes, even www.fatbabies.com.

Posting in a forum takes five minutes. If you're willing to invest five hours, consider making a map or level for your favorite game. Strategy games in particular typically come with easy to use level editors. Start by looking at some of the maps that came with the game. For your first attempt, don't try to make a ultra-all-encompassing megamap—you'd never finish it and it would suck if you did. Start with a small one-on-one map, then have a friend or two playtest it, use that feedback to make tweaks, and upload it to a fan site. After you've made a couple, start tackling larger, more complex ones, and if the game has one, tinker with the event editor or scripting language. At the very least, you'll gain a deeper appreciation for the complexities of designing and balancing levels. If you're lucky, the game's developer may even pay you to include your level in a future expansion pack or gold edition. PopTop paid for, and included, over 40 user-made maps in *Railroad Tycoon II Platinum*.

If you're willing to move from a five-hour investment to a 50-hour one, consider joining the mod community. Mods range from very simple graphics and weapons tweaks that take only a week or two to make, up to virtual re-writes of the original game taking a year or more. Again, study existing mods and start with something simple. Use fan sites and forums to hook up with other mod-makers. If you do come up with a solid mod, you can usually leverage that to gain an entry-level job in the industry.

Finally, if you can spare three or four days and the price of a plane ticket, consider volunteering at the annual Game Developer's Conference. The next one is in San Jose in early March, 2003. A full conference pass costs several hundred dollars, but by volunteering for a day, you can also attend a day for free. The conference has dozens of seminars and roundtables on every possible industry-related subject, and it's a great chance to make contacts and meet industry heavyweights. There's also an industry job fair there, with dozens of companies recruiting for all positions. Check out www.gdconf.com for more info. ●

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TOM CHICK

THREE finger salute

battlefield 2003

Reality has left the building

I'm in an airplane and I'm banking hard to the left. I'm using my mouse. I have to lift it up and move it in short sharp sweeps, as if I were brushing dirt off the mouse pad. This isn't so far removed from playing the original *Red Baron* with a keyboard, because back then I didn't have a joystick. Now I just can't be bothered to set it up, since I'm not going to be here long.

This plane might look like a P-51 Mustang, but it's really a one-man troop transport with a Mustang skin. I'm going to jump out as soon as get over a spawn point, opening my parachute right before I hit the ground. My parachute is the sort of thing a superhero would wear, kind of like the special suit that guy wore in *MDK* to make the jumping puzzles easier.

I had to race to get this plane because there were about six of us waiting for it. You'd think everyone would defer to me, since my online name is Billy_Mitchell. Maybe they don't know Brigadier General Billy Mitchell was an early champion of air power. He's probably spinning in his grave at me jumping from a fighter instead of wasting my time riding in one of those boats where nine times out of the ten the driver doesn't even know how to open the front door. I don't think this is what Mitchell had in mind when he argued that airplanes made navies obsolete, but he had the right idea.

> "There's no room for realism in computer games, which have succumbed to the broad appeal of whimsy and pacing."

I used to be a wargamer and a flight simmer. I used to count hexes and look up numbers on hit result tables. I used to know when a stall was coming and that I should apply opposite rudder during a spin. I used to know the front armor value of an M4A1 Sherman vs. the penetration value of a Tiger's 88mm gun. Now I crouch behind tanks with my magic wrench. If I'm crouched behind a Sherman tank and a bunch of newbies are plinking at it with their panzerschrecks, my magic wrench can fix the tank faster than they can chip away its front armor. It's like a real-time strategy game where a bunch of peasants can repair your town center faster than the other guy's archers can shave down its hit points.

The year is 1942. I know this from the title of *Battlefield 1942*. I'm an American fighting in the bocage, something that didn't really happen in 1942, unless it was North African bocage. But no one cares about realism anymore. Ever since *Panzer General*, and especially *Saving Private Ryan*, World War II is just source material, a licensed property that's gone over to public domain. Omaha Beach is just a map and swastikas are in poor taste.

Unlike wargames and flight sims, you never have a problem finding opponents, although their average mental age is fifteen. And a half, on a good server. It's a blasé new world, carefree and easy. You don't have a flight model, you'll never have to land because it's easier to just jump out, and you can use the B-17 as a tactical support bomber, tracing lazy eights in the sky over a small patch of ground, using the ball turret to strafe the Germans thirty years before the AC-130 Spectre gunship was even a gleam in Lockheed's eye.

There's no room for realism in computer games, which have succumbed to the broad appeal of whimsy and pacing. War is now long stretches of sheer terror punctuated by moments of boredom as the map loads. Computer games live in the domain of the unreal with snot guns and monster kills, where most gamers would notice whether Bleszinski's name was misspelled but wouldn't know Grigsby from Grisby, Tiller from Tiler, or Koger from Kroger. TK isn't a developer, he's the guy you kick from your server.

But that's okay. I'm on board for all this for now. I'm having fun and that's all that matters, right? Now that America has worked out her Vietnam issues, that war is fair game for ValuSoft shooters and *Platoon* adaptations. So NovaLogic is skipping ahead to the modern day source material, doing the Mogadishu stomp with *Black Hawk Down* and the Afghanistan tour with *Delta Force: Task Force Dagger*. This is cutting edge, ultra topical, deathmatch action with CNN immediacy. Headshots and Taliban.

Okay, here's where I get out. I would say I'm punching Elvis, but no one understands Sierra Hotel talk anymore. So I'll just say "Geronimo!" and see you somewhere between Saigon and Kabul. ●

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